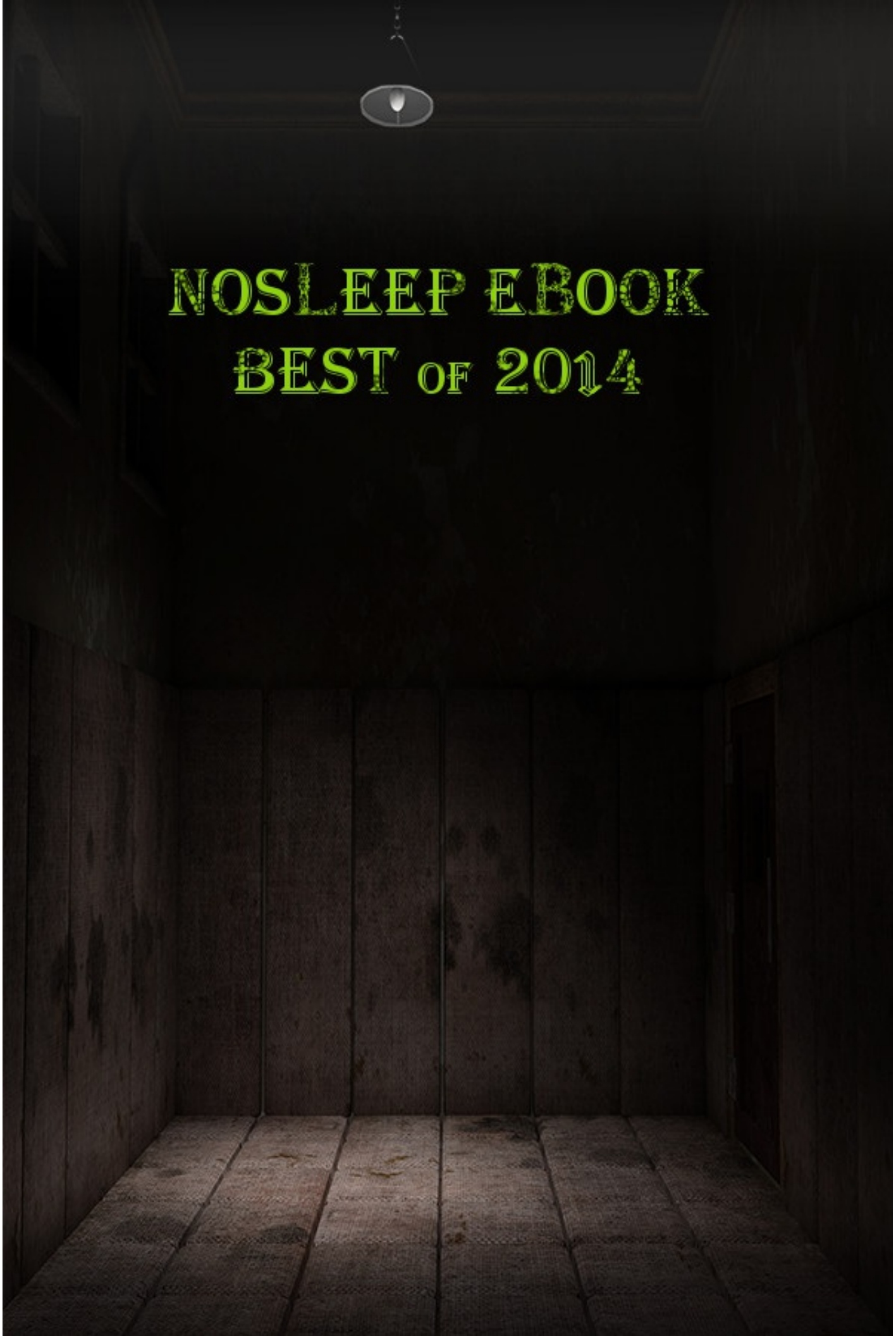
NoSleep eBook
Best of 2014

Front Matter

The official home of the nosleep eBook is nosleepebook.wordpress.com. All past eBooks *and* the new science fiction webzine *JUMP: Strange Tales of Things to Come* are available on the site free of charge in .mobi, .epub, and .pdf formats.

The eBook is compiled by Kristopher J. Patten. You can read his work at Shockingly Fictitious Tales of True Intrigue, The Brass Wyrm, and Filmalogical.

Congratulations to jessarojas, who won the nosleep eBook Cover Art Contest for this issue! You can see more of her work on maidofgore.com.

DerRaubritter also submitted some superb work to the contest, which is used to separate the Best of 2014 winners from the October and November contest winners.

I hold a cover art contest every three months in the nosleep OOC and I feel like there's never quite enough submissions for it to feel like a proper contest. If you're an artist and you'd like to see your art on the cover, head over to the OOC and submit something!

I also have one quick note about the format of the Best of book; you'll notice that some winners and runners up are missing from their rightful spots, such as the winner of the October contest. This is not because I've left that story out. Rather, it's because I'm trying to place stories in the most esteemed category in which they've won. The October winner also won a Best of 2014 category, and I feel that sory should take its rightful place as a yearly winner, rather than a monthly winner.

Happy reading!

October 2014

Hey, /r/nosleep, I have some tips to help you sleep at night!

by CarverMorraye

Runner Up - October Monthly Contest

Hey guys, I hope this is the right subreddit because I have some great tips to help you sleep better each night. My name is Carver and I've been practicing this for the past five months or so and I've been able to get a full night of sleep again! For the longest time I would have sleepless nights, and the few times I would be able to fall asleep were littered with nightmares. No good! I'll have to keep this short though, I have a daily computer curfew!

I will begin by saying that I'm only 12 years old, so this may not work for everyone, but I think that it will! My methods are simple enough!

My parents normally make me go to my room at 9pm each night. Once I'm in bed, I let my mind wander. Sometimes I'll start to imagine myself flying over my neighborhood at night with the cool breeze hitting my face, other times I'll imagine myself sitting under a waterfall somewhere in the tropics. The point is, you need to let your mind go someplace relaxing. This is a key first step, and it will take some practice because at first you will be experiencing a good deal of nervousness. It's okay! It will take some time to master, but I promise you that it's worth it when you get it down! Anyway, let your mind go to a peaceful place. You want to try to fall asleep within the first 15 minutes of laying down. This is also key! This part will help you sleep through the night. So, anyway, what I do is imagine myself in someplace peaceful, and then let my wandering thoughts take me elsewhere. Sometimes if I'm imagining myself flying, I'll spot something on the ground and fly to it. This normally sets off some sort of adventure in my head. If you do this correctly, you won't even realize that you're falling asleep! It can be fun to live out in your dreams from time to time, it's a very good stress reliever!!

One problem with this method is that if you get used to falling asleep this way, your dreams may become what is known as lucid. What this means is that you are aware that you are dreaming. If you're lucky, you won't have a dream, it makes the night go by faster. But anyways, if you do happen to have a lucid dream, you need to STAY CALM. This part is also key. If you become aware that you're dreaming, it may excite you or make you nervous about what's to come, and this sensation will most likely wake you up. You don't want that to happen! Whenever I find that I'm having a lucid dream, I try to focus on my setting. Focusing on things around you instead of trying to take control of your environment is a good way to forget that you're dreaming, and you'll be able to go back to not knowing that you're asleep, which is the best option. This part will typically last an hour or so, so for me it's around 10:15 when it ends. By this point you should try to stay as calm as possible, that way you can make it through the next half hour!

For other people it may be different, but for me it happens sometime between 10:15 and 10:30 at night.

You will wake up at some point to hands on you. This is when it's key that you DO NOT OPEN YOUR EYES. If you open your eyes, He will hit you really hard, and the marks and bruises this leaves will make it harder to sleep during the coming nights. Just let Him do what he needs to do, and you won't get hit! It's that easy! Sometimes you'll feel feverish, and other times you'll feel like you need to cry, but just hold it all in and keep your eyes closed! Oh, and don't make any sounds either. Sometimes you'll want to, but that will also make Him upset! If you're lucky, you'll actually be able to sleep through this part. Sometimes I can! It all boils down to how relaxed you're able to become by the end of the first part when you're dreaming. I find that if you're able to fall into a deeper sleep, you can sleep through this part more effectively. In fact, I've gotten to the point where I'll only wake up once or twice a week now, and I don't get hit anymore. It's pretty awesome!

The next part is pretty much a repetition of the first. Around 10:45pm or so, He'll stop. He'll make a noise that sounds like a sigh, and then He'll leave you alone. He'll leave the door ajar, but DO NOT CLOSE IT. That will make it so that She will hurt you later. But once He's gone, that's when you know how to move on to the next step!

So if you're awake at this point, it's more or less a repetition of the first part again. Try to relax, try to find a relaxing setting in your mind and immerse yourself in it! This time it will be harder for the first few times, because sometimes it will make you cry or sometimes you might ache afterwards. That's okay! This time you have much more time to fall asleep and find your happy place. Normally the second time around, I will think of clouds or the sky, something that doesn't involve me. I don't know why, but when I try to think of myself in these places it doesn't work, like I get upset or something. I'm not sure what it is, but I'm sure some of you will know what I'm talking about! Anyway, you have about 3 more hours to yourself, so like I said before, you'll have plenty of time to fall asleep! Just don't move too much, don't get out of bed even to go to the bathroom. You don't want Them to know you're awake, otherwise it will be worse later on. You can turn over in bed, but that's about it. This time, you probably won't lucid dream, which is normal so don't freak out about it!

Sometime between 1:30 and 2 in the morning, She will come in. If She sees that your door has been closed or locked, She will punish you. Sometimes She will put you in the Hole for a day, and we don't want that to happen! Anyway, this is the hardest part of the night, so if you get through this part you're pretty much home free! You will hear Her come into the room because the door will creak. Hopefully you've woken up at this point because if you're asleep it will definitely wake you up and you'll probably open your eyes from being startled. Eventually you can train your body to wake up at a certain time. I've looked it up and it has something to do with your Internal Clock. It's

actually pretty neat and worth reading up on!

Anyway, when you hear Her come in, it is important that you DO NOT MOVE AT ALL. This is key, because Her punishment is worse than His. She will make you hurt for a week, and it makes it so much harder for you to sleep. Like I said, stay still, keep your eyes closed, and make NO SOUNDS AT ALL. If you do this, She will be quick. Don't listen to what She is saying, because it might make you upset. So just stay still and pretend to be asleep. Sometimes She'll touch you just like He did. You have to let her. If you do anything to stop her, your punishment will be really really bad. She will make you bleed with Her blade, and it takes a long time for the cuts to heal. Plus, when She cuts you, She won't let anyone see you for close to a month. I've messed up several times and it's really hard, but I know you all can do it! You'll feel really strange and warm when She touches you, and it makes you need to go to the bathroom, but DO NOT GO TO THE BATHROOM. You have to stay in bed until at least 6 in the morning, then you can pee and take a shower, but if you leave before then, They might punish you.

The rest of the night should be easy, it will take longer to fall asleep after Her visit at first, but eventually you get used to it and you'll be able to sleep for almost the full night! Like I said, this took me a while to master, but it's worth it once you get it down!

Good luck everyone! I hope this helps you stay asleep at night :)

Hate the Sin, Love the Sinner

by LieutenantDanzig

Runner Up - October Monthly Contest

Almost a year ago, I was in a car accident. However, it wasn't until very recently that I realized my accident had left me with a very peculiar capability.

I had been T-boned by a drunk driver, sending me off the road and headfirst into a tree. Both my airbag and seat belt failed, launching me through the windshield a good 10-15 feet from my car.

Apparently I died, but only for a little bit.

From what I was told, my heart stopped beating on the ambulance, but I was resuscitated within a matter of minutes.

Still. Dead is dead, and that's what I was.

Once I was on the road to recovery, it was a quick one. Like I said, it was less than a year ago, and I'm already up to par again, and have been for a few months. I was fortunate to have a very supportive family. My father, mother, and two siblings were with me every step of the way, and for that I will always be grateful.

It was just two days ago that I realized what I was capable of. I was at the optometrist for a general exam. He checked the pressure of my eyes, which is always a weird sensation. I really hate the feeling of that machine blowing air into my eyeball, and it took several tries to get a proper reading due to what I considered to be a very natural reaction of flinching, much to the annoyance of the optometrist.

Then came the reading of the chart. No real troubles there. I've never had a problem with my vision, but a yearly exam never hurt anything.

But then came the point in the exam where the doctor swung his chair around, directly in front of me, and had me close my right eye, so that I could follow his pen with my left. Much like before, no real problems. At least not until we switched to the next eye. I closed my left eye, and looked at him with my right.

You can imagine my shock when I saw my doctor right in front of me, and another person behind him who hadn't been there before. A person who looked just like my optometrist in every way, except for the fact that he was naked, and happened to be going to town on a woman propped up on the counter of the examination room. A woman who looked a lot like the receptionist that had checked me in.

"What the fuck?!" I yelled as I opened my other eyelid. The intrusive couple instantly vanished before me, and it was once again just the (fully clothed) optometrist and I.

"Something the matter?" He asked with the most startled look on his face.

I didn't know what to say. I like to think I'm a pretty fast thinker, and I'm pretty sure admitting to this guy that I just saw an exact replica of him banging the receptionist in the same room as us might come off a bit, I don't know, crazy?

"Yeah, I'm fine. I think. I was in a pretty traumatic car accident a while back, I guess I'm still sorta processing things, and I have my moments where I'm not entirely, you know, all there, if that makes any sense." It was a lie, but a decent one. Like I said, I'm a relatively fast thinker.

But of course, when we tried to resume the examination, there they were again, just going at it. There was no doubt it was the optometrist and the receptionist. Clearly I was the only one seeing it, but I didn't really feel like dropping any more hints to my optometrist that I might be on the brink of losing my fucking mind, so I decided to grin and bear it, ignoring as best as I could.

As we were wrapping up the exam, the optometrist began writing me up my prescription for my lenses, and I noticed the wedding band around his finger.

"So, your wife is your receptionist? Does that get weird? I feel like that would get pretty weird."

"Uh, n-n-no, that's not my wife. M-my wife is an attorney. Why would you think that?" he stammered.

Whoops.

"Oh. Sorry. I guess I just assumed. My bad." I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks in embarrassment.

The rest of the day I spent experimenting my new found ability on strangers. It didn't take me long to realize I was seeing the last sin committed by someone, on the condition that my left eye was closed and I was looking with my right. This was confirmed pretty quickly when I saw the guy in front of me at Starbucks pull a wallet out of the purse of the lady in front of him. I closed my left eye, and watched an exact replication of the event with my right, combined with the old woman screaming out the word "nigger" at the top of her lungs. Double whammy.

This was just one example of many as I experimented with my new ability. Not everything was as cut and dry as the thief, but it was still pretty obvious: I was seeing the last sin committed by these people. It was scary, but awesome.

Gluttony.

Adultery.

Murder.

Hate.

Envy.

You'd be amazed at the fucked up shit people do.

That was just two days ago. I've seen a lot of shit since then.

Tonight I went over to my parents for dinner. It's become a weekly affair. I'm 20 and have been living with a roommate since around the time I turned 18, but I still make it a point to visit my parents and two younger sisters every week for family dinner.

There was a lot of internal debate going on as I sat at the dinner table. With strangers, it wasn't really a big deal, but with family? That's a whole new ballgame.

Still. I couldn't help but wonder. I feel like I know my family pretty well, especially with after all the help I got from them after the accident. I feel like their sins would be laughable. Nobody is perfect, my family included, but that doesn't mean the imperfections aren't minor ones.

After a lot of thinking, I finally decided to go for it. As we sat at the dinner table, my sisters going on and on about school, I closed my left eye.

I looked at my mother. Behind her, I saw her standing, leaning against the wall with a phone in her hand.

"Oh, that Lauren. She's such a slut. She'll shack up with any single man in the neighborhood. Maybe the married ones too!"

Gossip. Real classy, mom.

I looked over at my sister, Bethanie. She was 12 years old. She was slowly becoming a woman, but she was such a sweetheart and I know she was doing all that she could to hold on to that youthful innocence. I didn't expect much from her, and got exactly what I expected.

I watched as behind my youngest sister, another version of herself sat away from a group of younger girls. She silently brooded as the other group of girls discussed getting their very first bras.

Envy. Poor Bethany. I guess she wants to be a grown up more than I thought. That's good to keep in mind when it comes to comforting her.

From there, I looked at my other sister, Jenny. Jenny was 16 years old, and she was beautiful. She was well on her way to becoming her own woman, and I was proud of the woman she was becoming. Full of class, no rebel streak, exactly how you would want your younger sister to be.

What I got was something I could never have prepared for.

Behind her, I saw her partially clothed on her bed. Behind her, a man wearing a black ski mask held a knife to her throat and did his best to maintain Jenny's thrashing movements as she tried to escape.

"God fucking dammit! Just let me go! Please! God dammit just let me go!" she screamed.

It was no use. I watched as that man did unspeakable things to my sister, leaving her on the ground, crying and cursing the God that let this happen to her.

That can't be right, I thought to myself, Sure she used the Lord's name in vain, but who could blame her? How am I ever going to be able to look at her the same again? Do I even talk to her about it? How could I even bring that up? How can you go through something like that and walk out the other side a normal girl?

I wanted to cry. I loved my sister. She was such a wonderful young woman, but I couldn't break down now. There's no telling just how crazy they would think I am. I did my best to stifle my rage and my sadness, and I couldn't look at her any more, so I turned my one-eyed gaze to my father.

You can imagine how I felt when all I saw was that exact same scene being played out again.

She's in the house... find her.

by HeeHawShofar

Runner Up - October Monthly Contest

If you live in Menifee, CA and there is a knock at your door tonight, don't answer it. More importantly, don't leave anyone in the house by themselves. Get your phone, call the police, and stay together. I'm writing this as I'm sitting in this police station questioning room as a warning. So that what happened to me last night, won't happen to you tonight...

I live on my own in suburbia. Nice little neighborhood. The kind of place where kids will be playing out in the street with parents doing yard work when you pull into your driveway. That's exactly how last night began. My girlfriend and I pulled in and got out of the car. We waved to the kids and had a friendly chat with Mrs. Roop next door. This was the kind of life I always imagined. And at 20 I couldn't believe it had already happened for me. We went inside and started our evening. We made dinner. We love cooking together, there's a symmetry between us that just... works. We ate, watched some TV downstairs. Just a normal night. Once it was time we went upstairs, she started doing her nightly routine girls always do in the bathroom, and I just laid in bed, reading Penpal for the twentieth time. With the fan going and the water running from the bathroom, I almost didn't hear it. I wish now that the fan was set to 3 instead of 2, because then everything would be different. But no, it was just faint enough for me to hear the sound over everything else.

knock knock knock

I reached over and clicked the fan off. I waited for a moment listening...

knock knock knock

"God damn it." I thought. I put my book down on the nightstand and got up. I grabbed my zip-up off the chair and threw it on. As I walked out of the room I could hear my girlfriend starting to say something, but I wanted to get rid of whoever was at the door first. I slumped down the stairs a little pissy, thinking that if this was another solicitor trying to sell me glass cleaner I was going to have a fit. I zipped up the jacket as I flicked the light on next to the front door. I looked through the peephole, but it was pitch black. I flicked the outside light on. Still pitch black. I figured the light bulb had gone out again, as I have had problems with it before. Reluctantly I twisted the deadbolt and opened the door.

Nothing.

No one was there. I poked my head out to look around. The yard and driveway were empty. Looking back I made so many horrible mistakes. I stepped out onto the welcome mat. The streets were empty and silent, minus the hum from the street lights. I scoffed and figured it was the kids just trying to play a prank. I turned and walked back inside. After re-locking the door and heading back for the stairs, I started to have a feeling. Something just didn't feel right in my stomach and I knew that only one thing was going to put it at ease.

Food.

I walked down the hallway into the kitchen and flicked on the light. Opening up the fridge I started to scan the shelves for something quick and easy to eat. I settled on one of those wafer peanut butter and chocolate bars that you can get at the dollar stores. I keep them in the fridge so they don't melt in my hand when I'm eating them. I peeled back the plastic wrapper and as I was taking my first bite, I noticed something odd out of the corner of my eye. The window above the kitchen sink... was open. I'd never opened that window for the entire time I'd lived here. I thought back trying to remember when it could have happened, and then I recalled her saying that she was feeling really hot while she was doing the dishes. She must have opened it to try and cool off. I walked over and slid it shut, and finally made my way back upstairs. I walked back into the bedroom and the water was still running. I went to the entrance to the bathroom. "Did you say something earli-" I began to stay but stopped. The bathroom was empty. Water continued to pour out of the faucet, steam floating up, clinging to the mirror. I stopped the water and turned around to scan the room, she wasn't there. "Amanda?" I called out. No answer. I went to the walk in closet. Nothing. I started to leave the room, but again something catches my eye. I glanced at my nightstand, and on top of my book, was a piece of paper. It was folded in half and set up, making it look like a little tent. I reached out and picked it up. The first thing I obviously saw was the blood. It was a bloody fingerprint on the corner of the paper. My heart started to race. Finally my brain let my eyes pan over to read what it said, and even now, I wish it wouldn't have.

She's in the house... find her.

I read it those six words over and over. I looked around the room again, hoping to see Amanda just hiding in the corner snickering like she'd pulled off an amazing prank. But the room was empty. I walked around the room, looking behind chairs, inside the shower, inside the closet. I looked at the bed and felt like a 6 year old again as I slowly knelt down to look underneath. My hands had apparently been getting sweaty

because they kept slipping slightly against the hardwood floor. I bent down and lifted the skirt of the bed.

Nothing.

Just a couple dust bunnies and an old pair of shoes that I keep meaning to throw out. I stood back up and started to become agitated. My mind didn't know whether this was a joke or if I needed to be terrified.

"Amanda!" I yelled, "This isn't funny anymore, now just come out."

Silence.

"Look I'm really freaked out, so stop this!"

...

I walked out into the upstairs hallway and quickly went through all the rooms. The spare bedroom. Empty. The exercise room. Empty. Other upstairs bathroom. Empty. I ran downstairs and looked everywhere there, too. It was if she just vanished, and all that was left was this note. I figured that the only thing left to do was to call the police. I ran back upstairs and into the bedroom. The bathroom faucet must have had a leak because as I entered I started hearing faint drips of water. I went to the dresser to grab my phone, but it wasn't there. Neither were my keys, or wallet. I spun and looked at my nightstand. They weren't there. I grabbed my jeans I wore that day (I was in sweats by now) and checked the pockets. Empty. I threw the jeans on the floor in anger. I stood there for a moment without a clue of what I should do.

drip drip drip

I stormed into the bathroom and twisted the knob.

drip drip

I hit the faucet getting pissed but then I froze.

There was no water in the sink.

And the drips sounded further away.

I slowly walked back out into the bedroom.

drip drip

I moved around trying to determine where it was coming from. As I moved closer to the bed... it got louder. Once again, I slowly dropped to my knees, and bent over next to the bed. My hand slowly reached for the bed skirt, and lifted it up. For every drip my heart pounded fifty times. I sank my head down and looked under the bed. And then I saw it. A small pool or red about a foot in front of me. With more dripping down from above. I jumped to my feet and pulled the sheets off the bed. I slid my hands in between the mattress and the box spring, and after a moment of hesitation, I flung the mattress up with everything I had.

My throat closed instantly. I couldn't comprehend what was in front of me. My mind would only let me process the image one fraction at a time. At first I just saw my box spring, sitting inside my bed frame. Then I saw that there was a huge tear down the middle of the box spring.

And then I saw Amanda. Inside the box spring. Her beautiful face poking out from the tear. Then there was her neck, which was nothing but red. The final thing that my mind let me see appeared. It was right in the center, laying on her stomach... another note. I couldn't move. Tears were streaming down my face uncontrollably, but I didn't make a sound. My hands began to violently shake and my knees collapsed onto the edge of the box spring. I reached out and pulled Amanda's body up. My girl, my life, my everything. I wrapped my arms around her and started to scream.

The note slid off her hitting the box spring. My hand slowly moved down towards the note, now barely even able to bend my fingers. I somehow managed to grasp the note and bring it up to my eyes. My vision was completely blurred from the tears. I wiped them against my jacket sleeve and looked at the note. Again there was a bloody finger print, but at this point it could have been mine. Everything is hazy from those moments. But the words... the words are forever burned into my memory. They are the reason I am sitting here now, the reason I ran out of my house screaming for help.

But where am I?

Oct. 17th. I am Angela. I need your help. I am Angela.

by Bruxism-

Runner Up - October Monthly Contest

This needs to be said quickly, as I've only been back a couple of hours and the stages of which are my own are getting more infrequent and unpredictable. To get to the point of what is happening I need to explain Cecelia, I'll keep this part as short as I can.

When I was 5 years old my Mother and I were out in the garden picking gardenias. Although we did this a lot I clearly remember feeling particularly anxious about being outside that day. I was running around chasing butterflies and made my way around a large tree.

There was a girl about my age, sitting with her back against the worn trunk. She looked very similar to me, we could have been sisters. Long blonde hair, big blue eyes, chubby cheeks. She had been crying, but as soon as she noticed me she smiled and said she needed some company. I asked her name, it was Cecelia. I didn't feel anxious anymore.

At first my Mother thought it was sweet, she would always tell house guests, "Angela has such the imagination."

My father died when I was 3. Although I couldn't really remember him, she deemed it a coping mechanism. That was, until I turned 7. I had stopped wanting to spend time with my other friends, spending time with CC was all I wanted to do. I don't remember much of what we did together, but one thing I can however remember is the title of a story she would read or tell me. It was called,

"A Airier Yet Sulky Owl"

I always giggled at how dumb the title was, but I remember liking the story of the Sulky Owl. I briefly remember one part of the story that was CC's favourite, he had to do something in a certain amount of time and his adventure to get said thing done was filled with mishaps and blunders, it was silly, but looking back it had a very serious undertone. He was running out of time.

Cecelia seemed to age with me, visually and emotionally. We liked all the same things. She was the greatest friend a 7 year old could have. My Mother sent me to many therapists who would try to make me understand that she was imaginary, on some level I knew they were right, but she was so real to me. They started to get under my skin when I realised I wasn't normal, when other kids at school would tease me for sitting alone in the corner and presumably talk to myself.

On my 8th birthday CC changed, she started getting angry with me when I mentioned the other kids at school, the therapists, and my Mother. She told me that the only way we could truly have time together is if I took the pills beside my Mothers bed. I told her that she was ruining my life. I told her I hated her. I told her to leave me alone. She did. I never saw Cecelia again.

I told the therapists about her final request from me, I found out from my Mother later on that they announced me suicidal and this was my way of "getting past it". After that, however, I lived a very normal and happy childhood.

Once I became a teenager my anxiety became intense, I guess I "fell in with the wrong crowd" and started experimenting with drugs, a smoke here, a pill there. I wasn't necessarily abusing them, it was just a bit of fun. It was late one Saturday night when I was at a friends smoking weed and listening to music, I got a phone call from my Uncle. His voice was ridged and strained. "Angela, there's been an accident"

My Mother had been driving home from her late shift at work in the rain when the bus hit her. Died on impact. Probably didn't feel any pain. My world crumbled. I moved in with my Uncle and he had no way of controlling my behaviour, I started using more and more. Harder stuff.

When I was 17 I woke up one morning and went to get some coffee from the kitchen. My Uncle came out and thanked me for spending time

with him the night before. He said that he really enjoyed re-watching Jaws with me and was surprised I even liked that sort of thing. “You’d normally call it stupid” he said. I asked him what he was talking about, I had been at my friend Meagan’s house the night before. “Jesus, Angela. Are you still half asleep? You were at Meagan’s 2 nights ago.”

Freaking out, I broke down and told him I couldn’t remember the past 2 days. He said that although I seemed fine, obviously I had been abusing something. He took me to a rehab facility where I spent 30 days. My time there was bleak, but it seemed to go fast. In hindsight, I should have been concerned with just how fast it seemed. They gave me a journal to write my thoughts, I didn’t use it apart from some nonsense I apparently jotted down at some point. I don’t recall when.

“A Wailer Likes You Try.”

I managed to keep myself clean, I never touched a drug again - mainly out of fear. I would drink every now and again, but never more than a couple glasses. I was terrified of blacking out. I worked hard, studied hard, and at the age of 22 came out the other side with the qualifications to be an accountant (boring, I know).

There weren’t many jobs for me in my home town, so I decided to move to the city. I had a few friends there to use as a support network. I found an apartment with a fantastic view and moved in right away. My new job was relaxed, I worked in a small firm with a couple of other accountants who were friendly and fun to be around. 6 months after I had started working there, I became particularly close with a man named David. Although David was cute and he liked me, I didn’t really want a relationship at the time. So we kept it to innocent flirting.

I got up like normal one day and headed to the office, the owner was in but I couldn’t find David. I asked the owner where David was, “Is he sick?”.

“What are you talking about?” She replied. “You know David is on vacation in Hawaii for 3 weeks, we had drinks with him last night!”

The blood rushed from my face and I joked about being unwell and still half asleep. She told me I looked dreadful and to take the rest of the day off, that I hadn’t been acting myself for the last few weeks and I should probably get some rest. Before I left, I asked her when David first applied for vacation leave. Three weeks ago.

I got home and in a mad panic called my friend Jess and demanded she drop what she was doing and come over. I was sweating and crying. I hadn’t been using, I hadn’t even been drinking! When she arrived, I asked her if she had spent time with me over the past three weeks. She told me I was always too busy to have coffee, but I seemed strange on the phone. I tried to explain to her what I had experienced without coming off like a complete lunatic. It didn’t work. She told me to see a therapist and offered for me to stay at her place, I declined.

I went to the store and picked up a calendar, I had always been bad with dates and maybe this way I could keep track of time better. If this was something I had to deal with, I had to keep track of it. I considered seeing a therapist but the thought of them made me shudder. Taking a month off work for “personal reasons”, I did everything to get my mental health in check. Went on long walks, ate well, even bought a pug. His name was Sam. I would mark days on my calendar with a purple pen and memorise the date before I went to sleep. I would lose the odd day, making things very difficult. Something would be out of place, a new lamp, the positioning of my couch. I was terrified, but I knew it was only a day here and there, nothing as large as three weeks, so I took it as progress.

Normally I would be awoken by Sam jumping on my bed and running around on the covers, but one morning I woke to the sound of my next door neighbours doing renovations. I called out to Sam but he didn’t come. I got up in a panic and searched everywhere for him, but he wasn't in the apartment. Then I thought to check the calendar, 3 weeks earlier “Take Sam to the vet”. I’d been out for 4 months. 4 freaking months. I apparently was back at work, and me and David had a date in 3 days time. Even though I wasn’t “here”, I was still keeping track of things on the calendar, I really was losing it. I considered checking myself into some sort of mental institution but that thought was somewhat worse. Then I noticed I had a new voicemail message, I played it.

“Hey it’s Amanda” - I didn’t know any Amanda’s.

“Do you want to see a film on Wednesday night? Oh shit, no, wait. That’s your date night with dreamy David. How about Tuesday then? Let

me know, Cecelia. Mwaaahh!”

Cecelia? What the fuck? I thought about what the therapists had said to me, about the reason she looked like me. It had something to do with creating a different version of myself, but I was really and truly a happy kid before my Mother died. I didn’t want to be anyone else, but were they right?

I checked the calendar again and noticed a lunch date with this Amanda person, underneath the lunch date was a phrase.

“A Waiter Likely Yours”

A shopping date with another female name I didn’t recognise, again written underneath,

“A Retail Key You Swirl”

I called and canceled my date with David, lying by saying my Uncle was in town. I spent my time mourning Sam and my wellbeing. Ignoring phone calls from everyone. I thought about calling my Uncle but I didn’t want to disappoint him, I didn’t want him to think the worst of me.

I woke up this morning to the sound of my alarm. I scrambled to reach the snooze button. As I was shuffling my hand around trying to find it, eyes still clenched shut. I felt someone in my bed. The sound of my scream was so loud it made my own ears hurt, once the person in my bed grabbed me and looked me in the eye I realised it was David. “Babe, calm down. It’s just me, were you having another nightmare?”

I got out of bed quickly and told him that I was having another nightmare and I needed fresh air. I put on my robe and found a packet of cigarettes in the pocket, I don’t smoke but I felt the need to have one anyway, so I did. As I lit the smoke I noticed my left ring finger. A big diamond engagement ring sat placed, glistening in the sun. I was sure I had lost my mind, then I remembered to check the calendar. I ran inside to the cork board where I had placed it, October 17th, 2014. I moved here in 2012.

18 months. 18 months gone.

Sprinting to my laptop to write this out, I wondered how much time I had left. I don’t know anymore. Maybe this is will be the last time I am truly me, but I’m not Cecelia. I’m Angela. I am Angela. Please don’t forget me.

Halfway through writing this I went back to check the calendar, in a rage I ripped it down from the board, underneath there was a note that said.

“A Weary Likely Suitor, A Angel”

I don’t understand what these messages mean. Somebody, please, help me. Fast.

** Update **

I realised David and myself still work at the same firm. He didn't call me by any name, just pet names. I managed to convince him I was sick as I'm looking insanely pale as is, he went to work without me. I didn't even think of anagrams, thank you for pointing it out to me - but now I'm just more terrified. The apartment has changed a lot, there are boxes in the closet that I don't recognise. Looking back, I seem to only "come to" when I wake up, so maybe I should avoid sleeping until I can try to figure something out. I will go through the boxes and let you know if I find anything.

** 2nd Update **

David called me in his lunch break to let me know that he was heading out tonight and will probably stay at his apartment, I was so relieved. I've been trying to get in contact with my Uncle all day, but I can't find any of his contact information. I managed to find the email address of one of his distant relatives, I'm waiting to hear back. I found some… interesting and terrifying things in the boxes, things about Cecelia. I will update when I have more of a firm grasp on what they mean. I'm going to try to stay awake tonight.

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A Coalescing Enigma

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November 2014

Why You Can't Talk to the Dead

by daydalia

Winner - November Monthly Contest

My aunt was a con artist and she learned from the best - her father. Grandpa never made it big but he lived for the game. Staying under the radar was probably what made sure he never did get caught. Not once. He was so proud of that.

Mom didn't take up the family business. She got religion instead and married a tax accountant. It's so ironic that it sounds like a joke but it's true; dad was the best for helping out with math homework. Mom's more colourful relations were kept at a figurative arm's length throughout my childhood lest they'd corrupt me into following a more interesting life path.

Aunt Cassie was the only one who could wiggle her way into my life. She was fully licenced as a psychologist, which made her a smidge more respectable. But Aunt Cassie used her ability to read a person in a whole different way, one probably not intended by the university who issued her degree.

Aunt Cassie was a bona fide Psychic.

She had a shop and everything. Crystals, herbs, candles. Anything you needed to fill the mystic void in your life could be bought for a healthy markup at her little store. There was even a private room in the back that was used for readings and seances.

Because both my folks worked I would often get dropped off at the shop where I would help Aunt Cassie out with those little shows. Anything from messing with the lights to knocking on walls. Playing with the thermostat was my idea and it was an effective one. Customers came to get chills down their spine, didn't they? Why not provide?

Cassie helped me become the skeptic I am today. Showed me all the behind the scenes sleight of hand stuff. We'd watch daytime talk shows with magicians and mediums and Cassie would explain every step from a basic rundown of cold readings to how to spot an audience plant.

After one particularly convincing episode I asked the natural question. Couldn't some of it be real? My aunt's reply was firm.

"The dead don't talk, kiddo. Anyone who claims otherwise is blowing smoke out of their ass."

It was her conviction, more than anything, that made me believe her.

There was only one client I ever saw my aunt refuse. He was old, bald and stooped. Took his hat off when he came inside and twisted it in his hands as he talked. Cassie tensed up immediately when she saw him.

The man claimed to have worked in the prison systems. Death row. He'd been responsible for carrying out the final punishments of the worst convicted criminals on the planet. In his old age this tormented him, ate at his soul. He wanted Cassie to contact the souls of the ones he'd killed so he could apologize and beg forgiveness before he joined them.

My aunt threw the most epic fit. I'd never seen her so mad! She hollered and threw things. Shouting for him to get OUT OUT OUT OUT SHUT UP GET OUT

I hid under the counter with my hands over my ears until he left. Later I thought her reaction was one of fear because of the man's job. An executioner has to be a con artist's worst fear.

Eventually I got found out. I wanted to put on a magic show for my folks and stupidly I thought I'd do a Medium bit where I pretended to talk to Grandpa for mom since she missed him so much. Huge mistake. Mom freaked the hell out and banned me from seeing her sister ever again.

I'd left some textbooks at the shop though so I got to run in and grab them while mom fumed in the car outside. Aunt Cassie didn't even have to ask what was wrong. She could read my face, after all. I gave her a hug and a teary snot-filled goodbye. She did tell me one last secret though.

"Kiddo, there's a curse in this family that gets passed like a torch. I hope to whatever gods might be out there that I don't pass it on to you when I go."

We didn't get to talk again for more than nine years. That's when facebook entered the popular public sphere and no parental ban could keep me from trying to reconnect. It was awkward. She'd had a tough go of life; diagnosed with a schizoid disorder that took her business from

her. To pay bills she went legitimate and with her business went all her zest and playful passion for life.

One day I got home to a message waiting in my inbox that made my stomach drop to the floor.

"I love you, kiddo. Remember what I told you."

I dialled her number, already crying. No answer. Didn't stop me from dialing again and again and again and again...

I was too much of a mess to tell my mom. The police did that for me the next day. Car accident. Drunk driver.

The funeral was a blur. Relatives I'd never seen in the flesh packed the church. I sat between my parents in the front row and wracked my brain trying to figure out what it was my aunt wanted me to remember.

We followed the hearse to the cemetery in dead silence. The priest did the last little speeches and then I was left alone by her headstone, still straining to remember. Snatches of my parent's conversation floated in and out of my attention span. If only Cassie hadn't been so cryptic.

"-expecting such a small turnout. It's a shame."

Small turnout? That bothered me. The service had practically been stuffed to the rafters. I turned around to say something and finally understood.

Behind my parents there was a whole host of people, all standing and staring dead ahead. My parents weren't paying them the slightest attention. The priest muttered some soothing condolences and excused himself, walking right through the thick of the crowd without disturbing a single soul.

At the head of the group, looking just like the day I'd seen her last was Cassie. All the 'rest in peace' sentiment in the world wouldn't have done her any good. Her mouth was wide, wide, wide open and just like that I knew. I know what the family curse is. I know why the dead don't talk.

They're too busy screaming.

Parallelograms, or the story of my high school math teacher's suicide.

by 29timesover

Runner Up - November Monthly Contest

In Euclidian Geometry, a parallelogram is a (non self-intersecting) quadrilateral with two pairs of parallel sides.

During my freshman year of high school, I had third period Geometry Honors in a portable classroom- a rickety structure with aluminum siding that is the size of a single classroom but stands as its own building. Portables A-Z were lined up in two neat rows of 13 outside the main school building. These individual classrooms presented the unique dilemma that the students inside them walked to each portable outside for long enough to get uncomfortably wet in the rain, but not long enough to spend precious time putting on a raincoat. I'm certain that most teenage girls would be worried about their outfits, but I was an exception.

Despite the inconvenience, I enjoyed having class in a portable. It was quieter out there, and when it rained the drumming noise on the aluminum roof could easily soothe me to sleep. And, if the wind blew just right on the metal stairs, a harmony would ring out through the classroom.

The first day of school my Geometry teacher seemed completely normal. Ms. Hambly was a middle-aged lady with freckles and rusty brown hair who had decorated the portable with poster-sized memes relevant to math and 50 cent craft shapes you'd find somewhere like Hobby Lobby. She gave us a little printed-off infographic about the year that included some class information and logon codes for online programs like the online textbook. It seemed she'd doodled a bunch of shapes along the edges of the infographic while she was waiting for it to get copied- I had assumed she was just bored. She wished us a great year, and luck with the rest of our teachers before she left.

The second day of school, Ms. Hambly has us go around the room and said which shapes were our favorites- a real throwback to kindergarten. (I answered a dodecagon, because it was the most obscure thing I could think of.) After everyone finished, she told us that her favorite shapes parallelograms. The foam shapes on the wall, I noticed, were all parallelograms of some sort. "Parallelograms are so easy. They have their definition in their name. And they're a riddle. They're a puzzle that I'm always deciphering, and soon, you'll be deciphering it too. This year we're going to learn a lot about parallelograms. Soon, they'll become your favorite shape too. I promise." It was a promise. I wasn't convinced.

The first odd thing I noticed about Ms. Hambly was that she left all the windows and doors open in the portable, even with the air conditioning or heating running full blast. This wasn't a problem during the summer, because I had Geometry in the early morning when it was still cool out. But once the fall crept along the entire class began to get chilly. "I get creeped out with the doors closed," she explained. "We're all alone out here. You never know what could spring out at us in this room. Bring a jacket to my class from now on so you stay warm."

Rhomboids are quadrilaterals whose opposite sides are parallel and adjacent sides are unequal, and whose angles are not right angles. Rhomboids are the most common shape to be addressed as parallelograms, although rectangles and squares are also considered parallelograms.

Our unit on parallelograms wasn't that far into the year. She started off the unit with a long speech on the significance of parallelograms, which I fell asleep during. I wish so badly now that I hadn't- there might have been information in her speech that could give me some sort of clue or reason as to why she did what she did. She assigned us a packet on parallelograms that night.

The next morning she walked into class frantically, as if something was wrong. "Get out your homework," she said quickly. "I tell you every single day to get out your homework and you never do it. You should know what to expect by now."

We did, but three or four people hadn't done theirs, which sent Ms. Hambly into a sort of rage. "You're just trying to make me have a bad day, aren't you? Well, I'll tell you something, and that's that you can't control my emotions. You can't. And nobody can. Only I can. So you can stop trying to make my day miserable." The lights in the dingy portable caught her face, and she looked worn-down, almost frail, and her hair was frizzy, as if it hadn't been washed in a few days. "Fine, throw it away. Pretend like the homework was never assigned. This is a bad habit that you have to break." She opened up a powerpoint and adjusted the projector so that it was on the board. She muttered under her breath, "I'm trying, I'm trying so hard, but somedays I just can't do this."

I was driving home after winter color guard practice at about 8:45 or so, and as we turned to leave the school via the road that passes right by the portables, I saw Ms. Hambly walking towards the staff parking lot at a fast pace, clutching a stack of papers to her chest. She looked up as our car passed, and when she saw me in the front seat, she gave a weak smile my way. "Who's that?" my mom asked.

“Ms. Hambly,” I answered. “She teaches Geometry.”

“Is she nice?”

“She’s nice enough.”

A parallelogram with base b and height h can be divided into a trapezoid and a right triangle, and rearranged into a rectangle. This means that the area of a parallelogram is the same as that of a rectangle with the same base and height.

Our unit on parallelograms intensified the next day when Ms. Hambly walked into class, didn’t say anything about the homework from the previous night, and pulled up a picture of a parallelogram on the projector. It had some parallel and congruent markings but nothing else. “Look at that,” she said, motioning towards the parallelogram. “It’s just a shape, to you, but don’t you get it? There’s always something more. What does it mean? There’s got to be something more. Somedays I can see something more. That’s all I’m here for; that’s the whole reason I do this, because Euclid clearly saw something and I need to find it to. There’s some other meaning to all of this. Don’t you feel it?” I could already hear the snickers around the class, but Ms. Hambly was dead serious.

Ms. Hambly paced by my desk, and I caught a whiff of her. She smelled awful- almost like she hadn’t been showering, and she was looking increasingly frail by the day. Her skin was pale like chalk, and her fingernails were torn off like she’d been chewing them off in agony. But the oddest thing I noticed was that she had drawn all over her arm. I could only see what was poking out of the sleeve of her sweater: tons of little tiny parallelograms all over her wrist.

The sum of the distances from any interior point of a parallelogram to the sides is independent of the location of the point. (This is an extension of Viviani's theorem). The converse also holds: If the sum of the distances from a point in the interior of a quadrilateral to the sides is independent of the location of the point, then the quadrilateral is a parallelogram.

Luckily, the day afterwards was Saturday, and we had our first snow day of the year on Monday. When we returned on Tuesday, the color had returned to Ms. Hambly’s skin, she no longer stunk, and the parallelograms had been scrubbed off of her wrist. Her hair was thick and luscious. She jumped right into a well-planned lesson on proofs for parallelograms, complete with a powerpoint, and assigned a sensible amount of homework in the textbook. Somehow it was a relief- a weight lifted off my shoulders. Nobody in the class, even Ms. Hambly herself, commented on her sudden turnaround in behavior. But she seemed- detached, and artificial, as if somehow it was merely a facade.

I fell ill with a fever on Wednesday, and by Thursday it was clear that I had strep throat. I was absent from school on Friday, Monday, and Tuesday as well. On Thursday, Matt (a good friend of mine) sent me a text (I have these saved in my phone; maybe I’ll upload in the future): *Hey, where u been? Can’t get through math without you. Hambly going batshit again.*

I responded: *Really sick. You wouldn’t want this. Even if it meant missing Geometry. What kind of batshit… parallelograms again?*

Yeah

He texted me Monday. *Hey N, not fucking around, Hambly’s crazy. Worse than ever this time.*

What’d she do?

FLIPPED out at me and started yelling about those damn parallelograms. I swear she’s, like, always high. She smells really bad again too.

Of course it’s you. Did you not do your homework again, dipshit?

That’s beside the point.

;)

stfu you know this class is stupid. I [our friend] is getting a little freaked out over her too and pretty much nothing phases her

I started to worry a bit again, and so I convinced my mom that I was sick enough to stay home until lunch on Wednesday so I wouldn’t have to deal with Geometry. But Thursday was another deal altogether.

When I walked into math class, the entire portable stank- reeked, in fact. Ms. Hambly’s hair was sticking out all over the place in a frizzy mess. Her eyes were wild and bloodshot, like she hadn’t gotten any sleep recently.

Even after the bell rang and all the students filed in, covered their noses, and waited for class to start, Ms. Hambly did nothing. She sat at her desk, muttering things to herself and shuffling papers, and every once and awhile she’d stand up and walk around the classroom (much to the dismay of our sinuses) but then promptly sit back down and began to scribble things on pieces of paper. It was the oddest thing I’d ever seen.

The rest of the class didn't seem to care. I vowed that I would ask her if she needed help. I sat, terrified, rocking in my chair, working up the nerve to ask if she was alright, and if there was anything I could do. The bell rang, everybody else left, and I nervously crept over to her desk. "Ms. Hambly?"

"Hmm?" she looked up at me, but her eyes seemed accusing.

"Uh-" I froze. "I was, uh, I was absent. For a week. Well, a week and a day, but yeah. So when should I get the work?"

She paused for a long moment, staring me down suspiciously, and then told me, "Come see me after school. I'll give it to you."

I left the portable, and the smell of fresh air hit my nose. It's amazing how wonderful nothing at all can smell when you compare it to something much worse.

The sum of the squares of the lengths of the four sides of a parallelogram equals the sum of the squares of the lengths of the two diagonals.

That afternoon I returned to Portable A to find Ms. Hambly asleep at her desk. She was snoring loudly, and her body heaved with every breath in and out.

There were papers scattered all over the table. As I dared to walk closer, I realized that they were covered in parallelograms. There were hundreds of them- thousands, even, with words scribbled in the margins trying to prove something or another. I wish I could show you what they looked like, but they are all either in police custody right now, or destroyed. Some parallelograms had congruent markings, others had angle measures, and the penmanship was nearly illegible. I couldn't make out a single word, but the writing seemed fiercely determined. The ink often bled out onto the page as if Ms. Hambly had been pressing too hard as she wrote. "Ms. Hambly?" I asked.

As she looked up, her face struck me. It was weak and worn- down. She had a large dot of blue ink on her forehead from falling asleep against the ballpoint pen. Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. "I'm so glad you're here," she told me. "I need your help."

"Of course," I said softly. "What?"

"You have to see something in all of this," she told me. "You have to understand that there's something more than just these numbers and these figures. Please." She began to hand me paper after paper filled with her nonsensical diagrams and numbers. They came from everywhere: drawers in her desk, underneath the computer. She even rolled up her sleeves to show me the drawings on her wrists. "I can't rest until I get it."

"I'm sorry," I said suddenly, standing up. "I have to go. My- my mom's waiting." A lie, and we both knew it.

"Please," Ms. Hambly begged. "I know that you can see it. You're smart. I knew it from the very first day. You were the answer to this question I've been asking my entire life. Take these. Take them." She began to shove the papers towards me. "Can't you see it? I know you can. I'm almost there. I'm so, so close to figuring out the answer. To all of this."

"I have to go," I muttered, and I ran. I full-out sprinted away from Portable A, away from my school, and up to the first place I knew she wouldn't find me. The marching band practice field. I sat on the lamppost where my instrument section used to gather for after-practice sectionals. And I cried, because I was utterly and absolutely terrified.

That night Ms. Hambly slashed her wrists in the shape of a parallelogram. She bled to death on the floor of Portable A (the door was still wide open). The janitor found her that night during his final trash run. The school was closed for a week during investigation, and then Christmas break started. Rumors were all over the school, but I didn't confirm or deny a single one of them, because I knew that the parallelograms were between me and Ms. Hambly. And, of course, the police.

When we returned in January, we had a new teacher who was much kinder to us. She didn't like parallelograms as much, and she closed the doors and windows to the portable (which was newly replaced, and so it had the best heating system of all 26).

The weeks following Ms. Hambly's death, I became quite interested in parallelograms. There is something about them that is quite mysterious to me. They have so many properties and laws that it seems that the entirety of the world can be proved through them. I found myself up late one night, 7 library books on Euclid spread across the table, trying to decipher what it all meant. Ms. Hambly had meant what she said: I have the answer. As soon as I realized how distraught I had become that night, I threw the books to the ground. I ripped two of them to shreds in anger. There is something I am missing, and there is something we are all missing. And I will not stop short of insanity trying to prove it.

I've found a homemade snuff film.

by somethingstraange

Runner Up - November Monthly Contest

Please, please believe me.

My Dad was an odd man, quiet , reclusive and with a weird sense of humour. But it was a safe strangeness, a slight eccentricity that I assumed all aging fathers had.The strangest thing about him was the fact that his left hand only had a thumb, a forefinger and a little finger. He never explained what happened, and the one time I was to ask - when I was nearing 16 - he very calmly stared at me and told me to never ask again. It was the type of calm that chills you, the type of calm that's only formed through utter, utter rage. I'd asked my Mum about it and she'd always quietly replied "Ask your father.". Apart from that he was relatively normal.

My Dad used to stay up late, watching old VHS' in the attic whilst we (my mother and I) went about our business downstairs, me playing on the computer and her cooking, or whatever she got up to. The room at the top of the House, essentially a converted attic was his domain. My Dad didn't ask much, but that room was his and only his. My and my Mum were never, ever allowed in. I took it for granted at the time, assumed everyone had their 'me' place, and for the most part brushed it off. I was never allowed into the top room - I assumed when I was younger it was because it was his secret lair, though as I grew older I thought he could be watching porn.

The truth is far more sinister.

My Dad never left the house except for working whilst I was at school, he didn't seem to have many friends and so I never had a chance to see what he was really hiding. I tried once to look for Christmas presents, and once more when I was older... for porn. Both times the door was locked, firmly and the thought of my Dad finding me looking made me terrified. His temper flared rarely, and nastily.

After bunking off school after lunch to finish a project at the fine age of 19 to finally conquer the room, driven by a desire for independence and to satisfy my endless curiousity. I got in today. My Dad was at work, and judging by the half finished bottle of whiskey sitting on the stairs, he'd been drinking. He forgot to lock the door, which was a rarity. The past times I'd tried the door was double locked, but I assumed that in the rush my Dad had simply forgotten to lock it- assuming I'd be out all day. On opening I was assuming something dark and dangerous would appear, I'd see a dead body - or something hiedous, but instead all there was was a box of old VHS a faded armchair, and an old, large TV.

I instantly leapt to the videos, knowing I didn't have much time and that my Dad would be furious if he was to find me looking through them. I found a large amount of old movies, old taped TV shows - I was about to give up - until I found a tape simply labelled, in childish, scrawled hand 'PACT'. The reason I noticed it was that it was clean, the white case it was in was dog-eared, but clean. All the other videos were dusty but in pristine condition, and this film hidden at the bottom seemed to have been watched over and over.

Taking a deep breath, and listening to hear if the door unlocked I slipped it into the TV.

This is where it gets weird.

The film starts with a shot of four men naked, holding hands. They all wore masks - a clown, a monkey, a wolf and an owl. They chanted slowly and firmly some sort of latin chant, as the tempo and volume grew the film slowly faded in to a shot of a large, empty warehouse.

I don't know if you've ever heard of snuff films, but essentially they're real films of people being murdered, raped and god knows what else. The film would cut between the clown, wolf and monkey carrying out depraved acts whilst the clown filmed. The film was a mishmash, a collection of shorts that were at turns vile, sadistic and above-all inhuman. They began with a woman tied up, gagged and covered in a cold sweat being held down whilst the monkey would slowly run a razor blade up and down her skin. Lacerating her with thin red lines whilst the others masturbated, and the clown filmed. The shot was haunting, her face flashed between pure terror and pain, as the heavy breathing of the four filled the spaces between her screams. They slit her throat and immediately the film cut to a slow, lingering shot of the monkey sneaking into a hotel room with two children in a bed - and filmed him pissing on the carpet whilst they slept for about two minutes. The film would continue like this for a while, a horribly disturbing film of a rape - sometimes of women, once of a young child - and then cut to a surreal, but sexual shot. A young man, tied to a chair and weeping, with nails slowly being hammered into every appendage in his body - would be followed by a long shot of the Wolf, still with his mask on but dressed in a suit, offering children sweets until he was chased off by angry mothers. Scarring, violent outbursts followed by segments that made me deeply uncomfortable, something about the lingering camera, with heavy breathing as these men I'd just seen rape and kill doing the most bizarre things made me shudder.

These clips were always, *always* with the deep, heavy breathing in the background. It wasn't a pant that you get when you're out of breath, it was the type of deep breath that only comes from a truely primal sense of arousal.

Of course, you would ask, why would I watch it. At first I assumed that this was simply a movie. I loved horror, a good horror film late at night made something come alive in me. I assumed it could be a surreal horror movie, released early 90s that was banned or something, but a google search returned nothing for 'PACT'. it must be a real snuff film. I felt sick, and almost dry heaved but I was determined to finish it. If I'd been locked out my whole childhood I needed to know what this film was, and why it consumed my Dad. As any good son was, I hoped he had no part in it.

A thought flashed into my mind, this film must contain my Dad losing his fingers. Clown, Monkey, Owl and Wolf must have taken them from him. A few of the torture scenes included mutilation, and I was sure I would find a clip of my father being tortured - and it would all be fine. He wouldn't be the monster I was building in my head.

I kept watching.

The clips became shorter and shorter. It was building to a grotesque climax, the rape scenes almost stopped and the film was now focused entirely on murder, the three main characters laughing and whooping as young woman would plead before dying. I won't go too into detail about the film, I don't think I could legally, and more the safety of you. No human should ever have to witness something so raw, disgusting and primal. They were celebrating the darkest side of human nature.

The film ended with a long shot of of a young woman, dressed as a nurse, being repeatedly kicked by the three culprits. It started slowly, a steady thud, thud, thud of kicks before escalating into a full on beating.

I turned the sound down.

They kept going after she stopped moving, naked except for Doc Martins when they all looked to Clown. I heard, faintly, the zip of the cameraman's flies coming down - and as I reached to turn the television off, sick of the depravity whether fiction or not, the camera panned to the mirror. The hand holding the camera had a thumb, a forefinger and a little finger. Nothing else.

I almost screamed in pure terror, but the sound of the lock turning downstairs made me jump. I turned off the TV, and took out the VHS, slotting it back into it's box, shoving it back where it came from and dashing out the room. Quietly, with my heart racing I nipped into my room just as my Dad started coming up the stairs with a thud, thud, thud. My head was spinning, my mouth was dry and I was almost wretching - my whole body covered in a cold sweat. I casually passed him on the stairs to the kitchen, my whole body screaming at me to run - but I was still in a state of disbelief. It could all be a horror movie, and this could be some bizarre coincidence. In my head I made all manner of excuses for him, he had to be innocent.

I knew he wasn't.

"I'll be in my room if you need me. Remember to knock." He said.

Fuck. I forgot to rewind the tape. I'd forgotten that VHS' need rewinding otherwise they started from where you watched them.

He'd know.

He hasn't mentioned it yet, but he quietly mumbled something about "looking for his old camera".

Stranded in Hell

by unidentified_BA

Runner Up - November Monthly Contest

Stranded in Hell

I did everything for her.

Please remember that, and I will start at the beginning.

My wife and I, we woke in a suspended cage. All of our clothes were torn in places, but our bodies were fine. The cage was dirty and bare, the only thing in it was us. Outside the bars of the cage was an unending landscape of jagged rock, featureless except for the things that moved across it's surface. People and things that were not people. This is how my wife and I woke up in Hell.

We were both rational, but rationality only lasts so long. We cried, we screamed for help, we moved past emotion. The cage was our home for a time, but eventually the hunger forced us to make a decision. The cage was unlocked, why would it not be? It was hung from the ceiling with a massive chain, suspending us thousands of feet from the floor. The landing was not soft, but in Hell your body never stays broken. We learned this after the jump.

We walked for a very long time. Many people around us had either given up, choosing to lay on the floor and moan, or they walked like we did, my wife and I. She kept me going, and I like to think I her. The things that were not people were the only true reminder of where we were, all different from the next. Some of them were massive, crushing people in their wake, and others worked like a hive, a single mind for countless bodies. All of them had teeth and claws, stained from use.

There was a ceiling, so there had to be walls. It was a goal at least, something to do amidst the terrible hunger and pain. The ceiling was as flat as the land before us, it's only feature was a gaping hole that only the ragged, winged creatures could travel. A way out, maybe.

I did everything for her.

A long enough time, and you get used to anything. Hell almost seemed redundant. The sound of unending pain was boring and the sound of bone cracking was common. Only two things needed avoided. The dark, and the sacs.

In the shadow of the greater creatures, people sunk into the floor, almost as if the dark came alive, their desperate fighting and screams lost to the total blackness. We only saw this twice.

The other peril, the sacs, were large, unmoving, and made from burned flesh. My wife and I watched a man limp to one. It screamed at him, a high piercing noise that drew us closer from our vantage point. I thought of a siren briefly before the man was sprayed with blood, the force of it sent him backwards. My right arm was also covered, and it began to itch with a force I thought impossible. Before my eyes, my arm became a deep red as it hardened like steel, my fingers sharpening. In my terror, I paid little attention to the monster that sprang from the place the man landed. The sacs were the forges in which demons were made.

My arm never stopped itching, and my attempts to satisy it with my left hand made my fingernails cracked and broken. But I had a way to provide for my wife. I used my arm to cut and maim people, stealing clothes, food, shelter. We forgot our pain by forcing it on others.

I did everything and more for her.

There was no way to keep track of time, but it was so long I forgot my name. The only thing I never forgot was my wife, and my love for her. What got us in the end was one of those sacs, the sirens.

The call of them was undeniable, at least to my wife. I tried to stop her, but she was always faster, and my arm made running impossible with its great weight. I followed her, screaming, begging her to listen to me. But she was coated in the sick blood of that thing by the time I got to her.

Her body grew larger, her arms longer, almost tentacle like. Her screaming deepened as her feminine form was lost to the changing. I can not imagine the agony she was in. Her head grew horns, her back grew great leather wings, her legs fell off at the knee with a snap.

Once her transformation was done, she gave me a knowing, pained look. I had tears in my eyes, the first true liquid I felt since we got down here. I was picked up by one of her new arms, and a flap of her wings took us up. I felt the wind ripping through me, and the roar of our fellow demons as we tore through the hole in the ceiling, darkness taking over us.

My waking mind found myself sitting in the smashed car. The truck had hit us head on, sending my alcohol containers all over the interior. I knew they were mine because my wife did not drink. In the passenger seat, my wife's legs were crushed, my own arm hanging limply by the smallest amount of flesh possible. I looked into her dimming eyes, her iris's bright red and glowing with fire before she shut them forever.

She did everything for me. I'll never forgive myself, and I don't think I should.

Best of 2014

BEST OF 2014
ZGFISHER

I was a part of Queen's Guard in England

by inaaace

Winner - Scariest Story of 2014
Runner Up - Best Original Monster/Creature of 2014

Part 1

This happened to my brother-in-law two years ago. I am telling the story exactly the way he told me it. He appeared very genuine when telling it, and, you know what, after all that's happened to me, I have no reason not believe him. And as for you, well, you be the judge.

I was in the English army, you know? Two tours in Iraq, one in Afghanistan. My mom absolutely hated the life I chose, and I can't really blame her. But you know what? The fucked up part is that the biggest horror I've ever experienced wasn't in one of those shitty eastern places, no, it was in the very center of European "civilization", London.

After I finished my third tour, I was awarded by the army. Apparently, surviving fighting Taliban in the mountains is reason enough to be honored. They offered me a spot in Queen's Guard. I'm not sure how much you know about that, but in England, it's a pretty big deal. And I hated it. I was permanently stationed at home, and as a reward for my "bravery" I was now standing in front of buildings motionless while annoying Chinese tourists tried to make me laugh. I wanted out, but the honor of the position, combined with my mother's happiness that the biggest danger I could ever face would be an Asian tourist, I had no choice but to do it. Only if I knew I'd be safer in some cave in Kabul…

So I was stationed to work at the Tower of London few shifts a week. Shifts were usually 2-3 hours long, depending on how many people worked that day. Gotta tell you, that job gets old quickly. Drunk people who try to mess with you along with annoying tourists who think they're the first ones ever to try to make you laugh, you just want out of your own skin. But it was a job, and it paid, so I shut the fuck up and did it.

Now, this one day, this one day in 2012 started boring as any other day. I had a few French guys trying to mess with me (god they're the worst, and you can't do shit unless they threaten you), then I had a group of drunk Russian chicks which wasn't so bad. The heat was just starting to melt that fucking hat into my skull when a huge group of tourists showed up. Some sort of a guided tour, I assumed. They all did their standard spiel, pictures, "funny" faces, jokes, etc. They all had their cameras out, and they all wore same t-shirts, some Big Ben tour bullshit. All but one. I noticed her standing in the back, just staring at me. She was a good looking woman, probably early forties, really dark long hair and somewhat pale, which made me think she was English. She did seem to be the part of the tour as she stood with all of the others.

After the group finally took enough pictures and realized I wasn't gonna laugh, they started moving on. Except the pale woman who stayed and kept watching me. Now, I've seen my fair share of people doing all kinds of stupid stuff to get a reaction out of me, but this was a new one. Not only that, this lady was committed. Two hours and hundreds of tourists later, she still stood in the very same spot, just staring at me. The day got pretty hot and there was no way she was comfortable, but I shit you not, she was calmer than I was. She wasn't smiling which was strange because I assumed she was trying to make me react. About thirty minutes later, when the crowd around me slowly died out, she took a slow step towards me. Then another one. "Here we go, joke incoming" I thought as she took her sweet time walking up closer.

She stopped about two feet away from me. She was looking straight into my eyes. Tilted her head to the left, then to the right, which I assumed was her attempt at making me laugh. Then I realized this woman wasn't here to joke around. Still standing at two feet away, she started leaning towards me. There was something just so fucked up about her mannerisms that made me extremely uneasy. She never lost an eye contact with me. She kept leaning towards me while her feet never moved. Her face stopped just short of touching mine and her position seemed unnatural at that point. Her head started slowly shaking, like when you get out of the pool or a shower and are freezing, you know?

And then, then she scared the fucking shit out of me. I had people screaming in my face, I even had a moron trying to fight me, but what she did was by far the worst. She opened her mouth as if she were about to let the loudest scream at me, but nothing came out. Nothing. She just stood there, leaned at an unnatural angle, inches from my face, letting a fucking silent scream or whatever that was out of her wide open mouth. And the speed of her shaking increased. Now, I'm not gonna lie, even though it was really hot that day, I started feeling cold and goosebumps ran under my uniform. I finally got myself together and started marching away from her – we are allowed to do a 10-step march occasionally.

When I got to the end of one way, I stopped and closed my eyes. I just wanted her to be gone when I turned around. As I made a 180 degree turn, I instantly froze. She was right in front of me; leaned all the way to my face, mouth open even wider, head now shaking uncontrollably.

I was so taken aback, I was unable to react. Noise, screaming, and other stuff I can deal with, but this silent creepy fucking behavior was honestly intimidating me.

“Make way for the Queens Guard!” I yelled. We are allowed to say that when someone is in our way. She didn’t react, but she did lean farther to about an inch from my face.

“MAKE WAY FOR THE QUEEN’S GUARD” I yelled even louder, hoping my voice wouldn’t break.

She had absolutely zero regard for my orders. Unwilling to deal with the bullshit any longer, I stepped back and pointed my bayonet at her. That was our last resort for annoying tourists.

She immediately closed her mouth and leaned back into a normal human position. I wasn’t going to wait for her to do whatever she was about to do, so I started marching around her. When I got back to my post, I turned around and stood still. I couldn’t see her in the corner of my eye which gave me a huge relief. “Jesus, this fucking job” I thought to myself “I’m gonna have to look into…”

“10, 9, 8” someone whispered in my right ear. It must be her. She was behind me.

“10, 9, 8” whispers came from my left side. Goosebumps were at an all-time erect now. Hilarious, isn’t it? Combat vet, killed more people than he’d ever want to admit, is now scared to hell of some batshit tourist lady.

“10, 9, 8, 10, 9, 8, 10, 9, 8” she sped up her whispering. Then walked in front of me. “10, 9, 8, 10, 9, 8” she was now whispering incredibly fast. Actually, whispering doesn’t describe it properly. It was like yelling, but in a whisper tone, if that makes any sense. It was surreal. She leaned towards my face again, whispering those fucking numbers frantically.

I was about to break my orders. I couldn’t take it anymore. There was something fucked up about this woman, and I couldn’t deal with it.

“Ma’m,” I spoke in a voice of the biggest scared pussy, “Ma’m will you please step…”

And then, a huge group of loud tourist ran up to us. The crazy woman leaned back, still looking at me. She whispered “10, 9, 8” one more time while never losing an eye contact. Then she walked away, as slowly as she moved around me. It was so strange watching her slowly disappear into the crowd. All that was left was a strange feeling of something unnatural. That, and a group of life-saving Asian tourists. Never thought I’d be so happy to see a Nikon-snapping Chinese guy.

After my shift was done, I went into our base and told the story to a couple of guys. They all had some experience with creepy people, but never on this level. When our shift commander came, guys jokingly told him how I was “abused” on duty. He wanted some laughs, so he asked for the full story. But when I started telling what happened, he quickly lost his smile.

“Stop, stop,” he said. “Did you talk to her?”

“Sir?” I asked intrigued.

“Son, did you or did you not speak to this woman?”

I wasn’t gonna lose my weekly pay over breaking that stupid no-talking rule, so I lied. “Of course not, sir.”

He seemed to calm down. “Good. And if she ever comes back, never talk back, understood? And that goes for all of you.”

Joking atmosphere quickly died out in the break room. I was puzzled, but I was even more tired, so I decided to go home and sleep instead of worrying about crazy fucking tourists.

Next few shifts went by as boring as they were supposed to be. Woman was nowhere to be seen, and since my girlfriend was about to visit me all the way from Netherlands, I forgot about the incident.

Tuesday night around 3am, I was awoken by loud banging at the door. For some strange reason, the first thought that crossed my mind was that fucked up woman from a week ago.

“Babe, would you mind peeping through the hole to see who it is?” I lazily mumbled as I gently pushed my girlfriend. She was dead asleep; I swear nothing could wake her up. Semi-conscious, I stumbled through the hallway and to the door. “Who is it?” I muttered while peeking through the hole, but it was too dark outside. That sobered me up. “Who is it?” I asked again, but the only answer I got was louder banging.

“Fuck it” I thought as I took a deep breath and opened the door.

There are about million things I’d rather see standing in front of me at that moment. And there was only one person I did not expect to be at the door.

My girlfriend.

I was supposed to pick her up tonight.

I nearly lost all control of my legs. Thousand things raced through my mind which was having trouble comprehending what in the fuck was happening.

“Thanks for picking me up at the Heathrow, asshole,” my girlfriend said as she slammed the carryon on my chest. I was still speechless.

“So, I travel all the way from Amsterdam to see you, and you forget? Really?”

I wasn’t hearing it. I knew I was half asleep when I got up, but there WAS someone in my bed. I wasn’t dreaming for fuck’s sake.

“Stay here” I mumbled as I handed her the bag back.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just stay here.”

Not knowing where I got the courage to walk to the bedroom, I slowly made my way.

I know what you’re thinking – in movies and books, guy walks into the room and boom, its empty, right? I fucking wish.

I walked into my room and it was completely dark. But I could hear breathing. Heavy breathing. My pulse was so high I was sure I was gonna pass out, but I flipped the switch.

“7, 6, 5, 7, 6, 5” whispers came from the corner of the room where she stood. That same fucking woman. She stood almost glued to the corner of the room, her back to the wall. She was looking straight at me. And though I was sure I lost the power of speech, I managed to squeeze out a “What the fuck”.

“7, 6, 5” she said as she took the first slow step towards me. Her mouth was always wide open, as if she were letting out that damn soundless scream. Every step she’d make, she’d close her mouth enough to say “7, 6, 5”.

I couldn’t move. Nothing in this world existed besides this woman slowly walking towards me. What a creepy and unsettling feeling. Like, I wasn’t physically afraid of her, right? I could take her down – and was ready to. But this kind of fear was something foreign to me. Seemed like I was afraid for my, shit, I don’t know, soul? You know what I mean? I knew she couldn’t hurt me physically, but I was stills scared. Not to mention I fucking somehow slept in the same bed with this whatever the fuck she is.

She came incredibly close to me. The familiar lean. An inch from my face. My breathing was so irregular and loud, it was the only noise in the room.

“7, 6, 5.”

Suddenly, something about this had a strangely familiar feeling.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” scream came from behind me.

My girlfriend.

I snapped into reality, turned around and grabbed my girl. “Run!” I yelled as we escaped the room. We ran to the kitchen where I grabbed one of those “As seen on TV” steel-cutting knives. My girlfriend was just silently weeping at my side, unable to even ask questions.

I could hear footsteps. First, I saw her shadow, then I saw her calmly walking through the hallway. Her mouth was now so unnaturally wide open, and she wasn’t looking at me anymore. She was looking at the ceiling as she slowly made her way to the door. Her head was shaking very fast. It was abso-fucking-lutely surreal, I’m telling you. I mean, just imagine, this woman, who creeped you out a week ago, is now walking through your place at 3 in the morning, staring at the ceiling with mouth impossibly wide open. Not to mention you slept next to her for who knows how long.

When she finally walked out, I ran to the door and slammed it. Girlfriend was still unable to speak. When we got ourselves together, I was afraid she’d think I cheated on her with this woman, but she didn’t. She saw that horror walk through out hallway and she knew something was wrong.

I was terrified, but I didn’t let it show. The scariest part of everything was that I had a job that required me to stand still and not react to my surroundings. I told my girlfriend about my experience with this fucked up woman, but I didn’t mention her “10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5” whispers. I

didn’t want to scare her any further.

Because , what could those whispers be if not a countdown?

Part 2

I was hesitant to call the police after that crazy whatever-she-was left my apartment, but my girlfriend wouldn't have it. Police were at our place in about 20 minutes. Took our statements, woman's description, and told us to immediately call should anything else happen.

But my mind was set on something else. My commander. He told me not to talk to her. And I did. And now I'm waking up in bed with her, and how the fuck did she even get into my flat, shit man, too many thoughts.

The next day I went to my commander's office.

"Sir," I said very carefully – you need to understand that losing this job, no matter how shitty it was, definitely wasn't on my to-do list - "Sir, we need to talk."

He looked up at me from his desk and I swear to you, I swear he already knew. His face lost all the emotion. He didn't even ask what was happening. "Sit," he said as he leaned back in his chair.

"Sir, I…" I was having a hard time confessing to breaking the rules of the Guard.

"You spoke to her. You responded." He said as he leaned towards me. "Didn't you."

"Well, I just asked her to move, that's all."

"No, not the Queen's Guard command. Did you say anything else to her?" "I did." ** If you remember, besides me yelling "MAKE WAY FOR THE QUEEN'S GUARD", I did say "Ma'm, will you please…"**

"God damn it, son. God fucking damn it."

This was the first time I heard my commander curse.

"Sir, who is this woman?"

"I'm going to file for your immediate removal from the guard," he brushed me off as he opened his desk to look for something.

"Sir?" I asked, not believing I was about to lose my job.

"Don't worry, I'll find you something else to do. But your days in the Guard are over. Expect the transfer within a week."

"Sir, but I was just…" "That is all, son, you can leave now." He said, not even looking at me.

I was pissed. But then again, if I was going to keep the paycheck without having to stand in the street and deal with tourists/crazy fucking creatures, I was fine.

The new schedule came out and, what do you know, I was only scheduled to work one shift that week. That was really handy because I was supposed to babysit my 7 year old niece visiting from Birmingham, and I had already planned out the whole weekend with her.

Thursday came with no further incidents with the mouth-wide-open bitch. My girlfriend had finally calmed down. She left back to Amsterdam that morning and in a good mood. Life was getting back on track.

My shift that day was 6-10pm in front of St. James Palace. There are usually two of us working there, but for some reason, I was scheduled to work alone from 9-10. Here's how the spot where I worked looks. The little wooden post is where we'd stand in case of a storm. "Ok, buddy, hang in there, almost done," my fellow guard said at 9:02 pm, as he marched back inside.

"One more hour. One last hour of this damn job and I am free. God, it feels good…" I thought as I stood still in front of my post. Night was unusually quiet, but it was starting to rain, so I guess it was to be expected. 9:30pm. Still light rain, still boring as fuck. Almost there. 9:45pm. Rain was picking up, so I decided to spend my last few minutes in the post.

I turned around.

I shouldn't have.

There she was.

If I were a writer, I'd use all these descriptive tools to paint a picture of how horrifying that woman looked that night. Let me tell you, this

was the single most terrifying thing I've ever seen, and I've seen a child getting killed by a land mine.

The woman was standing at the door of the post. She wore a white dress that was nearly shining in the dark. But her face, fuck man, her face. She wasn't looking at me, which somehow made it even fucking worst. She was looking at the sky or whatever the hell was up there, and her eyes went so far up I could only see bottom of her pupils. Her mouth was so wide open, I was now nearly sure it wasn't possible for a human to do this.

There is something surreal about standing in front of someone who doesn't act rationally. Like, if you're getting mugged, you know they want your money. Shit, if you're getting shot at, you know they want to kill you. But the true mental horror is in not knowing what in the fuck she wanted from me.

9:49. Ok, 11 minutes of this and I can finally…

She took a step towards me. Then another one. At about two feet from me, she stopped.

She started leaning. That fucking lean. Her face stopped just short of mine. At first her head started shaking slowly, but started to move increasingly fast. It was a small kind of shaking, as I said before, kinda like when you get out of the shower into an air-conditioned room and start shaking. The pupils were so high up, I could barely see them. Her head was now trembling so fast I was wondering how it was possible. And that mouth, man, that mouth was so unnaturally, un-fucking-humanly open. I swear I saw corners of her lips starting to bleed because her skin wasn't able to support the opening.

No sound.

The street was silent, probably the most silent I've ever seen it. And the worst part is, it was night time. I know I do this a lot, but just imagine it one more time – you're standing motionlessly in the middle of the street, and there is this bleeding-wide-open mouth woman an inch from your face, doing whatever the fuck she's doing, and not a soul in sight. And no sound, whatsoever.

9:54pm.

Come the fuck on.

And then, as if she heard my thought, her pupils dropped back and looked straight at me. I nearly jumped back. She closed her mouth, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'd rather she kept it open. Her jaw started rapidly opening and closing, as if she were biting something invisible. Her teeth were hitting each other so hard, I was sure they'd break.

That was it for me, I couldn't take it anymore.

I took a step back and screamed "JUST FUCKING STOP ALREADY!"

And she did. Teeth stopped clenching, mouth closed, and she stood back up from the leaning. She took a step towards me and, for the first time ever, smiled.

"4, 3, 2, 1, 4, 3, 2, 1, 4 ,3 ,2 ,1" she started whispering, never losing the smile.

"What is that, what the fuck is that?" I begged. I was ready to grab her, shake, her, anything, just for an answer. What the fuck did she want from me, right?

9:58pm.

"What the fuck!" came from behind me.

My commander.

He ran up to me, disregarding the crazy bitch in front.

"Did you talk to her?"

"I…"

"DID YOU FUCKING TALK TO HER?" he yelled, louder and while grabbing my uniform. He didn't even pay attention to the woman.

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ… What number?" he said while finally letting me out of his fists.

“Sir?” I answered confused as you can imagine.

“What was the last number she said? What was it? Was it a zero?”

“No, I think she stopped at a 1… But why…?”

All this time, the woman just stood still and looked at us with a smile. Then, she took a step towards us. She slowly walked in between my commander and me.

“Don’t say a thing to her, not a fucking thing,” the commander said with obvious fear on his face.

The woman turned from me and towards him. She got into his face, and even from behind, I could see her mouth being wide open.

“Go, just go,” the commander said as he looked at me. He was avoiding acknowledging her. I heard her teeth clenching.

“I can’t just leave you,” I said.

“Go, and don’t come back here. I’ll take care of this.”

You know, I like to think of myself as brave, but at that moment, all I wanted to do is leave. I hope you can’t blame me for that. So I started running away.

“And never talk to her again!” the commander yelled as I got away.

Now, I know a lot this stuff sounds like bullshit, and you’re right, it really does. Sure, looking back at it now, I could’ve arrested her, hell I could’ve even killed the bitch, and so could’ve the commander. But you know what? When you find yourself in a situation as impossible and as unreal as that one, you don’t act rationally, you don’t think logically as you would in a normal situation. I went home, took a cold shower (after making sure my doors were locked) and I collapsed on the bed.

In the morning I texted my shift buddy to see if commander was ok and his “Yeah, why wouldn’t he be?” text back meant he made it. That’s all I needed to know, I was out of that life.

My niece came in town on Friday and I had her for the weekend. Running around a seven year old will make you lose your mind, let alone leave time to think about some crazy woman harassing you. Besides, I was done with that job – that morning I got transfer papers.

I spent the whole day taking the kid different places she liked. Shit was exhausting. Saturday morning I made us some breakfast as we watched cartoons for the good part of it. Then we put in a Catwoman movie and my niece dressed as her – she loved her for some reason (movie was a complete trash). I guess I wasn’t used to having to take care of the kids because I fell asleep on the couch, already exhausted.

My niece woke me up.

“Uki,” she said, that’s what she calls me, “Uki, let’s play.” She was holding my old pair of walkie-talkies. I used to love those as a kid, so I couldn’t say no to her.

“Sure, let’s see if these old things work. Go outside of the house, I want to check the range on these babies.”

Her face lit up as she ran out.

I turned the walkie-talkie on and started playing with it. Static noise was there, meaning the batteries worked, it was only a matter of finding the right frequency.

“Ashley? Ashley, do you copy, over?” I tried a few times.

I finally heard something.

“Ashley, do you copy, I repeat, do you copy, over?”

“Hero” was all I heard at a low volume.

“Ashely, you punk, you need to say **over** when you’re done.”

“H…e..ro” I heard again.

“This damn thing,” I thought. Too lazy to go out, I took the batteries out, blew at them, as if that ever does anything, and put them back in.

“Ok, Catwoman hero, do you copy now, over?”

“ZERO”

I dropped the walkie-talkie.

That wasn’t Ashley’s voice. That wasn’t “Hero” I thought I heard.

Ashley.

I ran outside and immediately started fucking hating myself for letting the child go out on its own. Ashley stood in the yard, holding a radio, squeezing it hard. In front of her stood that same woman, bent over and all the way down to my kid’s face.

“Zero, zero, zero, zero, zero” was what woman frantically repeated in Ashley’s traumatized face.

Yeah, when some freak harasses me, I can control myself. But a child, my cousin?

I lost it. I ran towards the woman and tackled her with enough force I was sure I’d hurt her. As soon as I hit the ground, I got up and grabbed Ashley. “Are you alright?” I yelled, “Did she touch you?!” I didn’t even realize how hard I was shaking her, probably scaring her even more.

Ashely was now crying so hard, she couldn’t even answer.

“Let’s go in,” I said as I turned towards the woman. She was still lying on the ground, facing down.

As soon as we got into the house, we went to the window. The woman started standing up. She turned towards us.

“I’m calling the police,” I told terrified Ashely as I picked up my cell. “Don’t worry baby, it’s going to be alright.”

The woman took a step towards the window. Then another one. Her nose was bleeding and she was visibly hurt as she was limping, but it didn’t seem to matter to her.

I’ll admit, I was nearly frozen from the rush of adrenaline I had. We just stood there at the window, watching this freak approaching us.

“Police are on the way,” I told my niece who was still crying.

The woman walked up to the window.

She… She wasn’t looking at me anymore. She leaned towards Ashley’s face. Poor little thing grabbed my hand and was squeezing it way too hard for a 7 year old. That fucking thing, bitch, woman, whatever she was, leaned all the way to the window. Only a piece of glass was separating her from Ashley. As I was about to take my niece into another room, far from this thing, the woman opened her mouth, but immediately closed it into a smile. Then again. It was fucking impossibly strange. As she’d open her mouth, her pupils would shoot up towards the back of her head, only to immediately come back followed with a smile. She was now alternating inhumanely fast in between a smile and a gaping mouth paired with nearly pupil-less eyes.

“Let’s get out of here,” I told Ashley as I picked her up and took her to my room.

Police arrived about 15 minutes later. They started scanning the neighborhood and actually caught a woman who matched my description. I was due at the police station for identification, but first I had to drop Ashley off at the train station. Her mum wanted her back immediately after what happened, and I couldn’t blame her. I took her to the station, where I arranged for the staff to watch her until her destination.

A very pleasant conductor promised he’d watch her whole trip. He took Ashley’s hand and promised to show her all the cool parts of the train. Finally, the kid smiled.

As train was getting ready to leave, conductor put my niece on the stairs. “Say bye to your uncle,” he said, “we’re about to leave.”

“Bye Ashley, tell your mum to call me when you arrive, ok?”

She didn’t respond to me, which was understandable. The kid was probably still fucking terrified, hell, I was still terrified.

As the announcer said all boarding was complete, conductor opened the door for them to get inside the train.

Ashley didn't move, though. She looked up at the conductor.

"Let's go now," he said.

Ashley opened her mouth, looking up at the man.

"We have to get in now, we're about to start moving honey," he said again. "Let's go."

As he entered the train and Ashely followed, I heard her say "10 9 8."

My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook. I've got the screenshots. I don't know what to do.

by natesw

Runner Up - Scariest Story of 2014

Tonight's kind of a catalyst for this post. I just received another message, and it's worse than any of the others.

My girlfriend died on the 7th of August, 2012. She was involved in a three car collision driving home from work when someone ran a red light. She passed away within minutes on the scene.

We had been dating for five years at that point. She wasn't big on the idea of marriage (it felt archaic, she said, gave her a weird vibe), but if she had been, I would have married her within three months of our relationship. She was vibrant; the kind of girl that would choose dare every time. She was happiest when camping, but a total technophile too. She always smelled like cinnamon.

That being said, she wasn't perfect. She always said something along the lines of, "If I kark it first, don't just say good things about me. I've never liked that. If you don't pay me out, you're doing me a disservice. I've got so many flaws, and that's just part of me." So, this is for Em: the music she said she liked and the music she actually liked were very different. Her idea of affection was a side-hug. She had really long toes, like a chimpanzee.

I know that's tangential, but I don't feel right discussing her without you having an idea of what she was like.

Onto the meat. Em had been dead for approaching thirteen months when she first messaged me.

September 4, 2013. This is when it began. I had left Emily's Facebook account activated so I could send her the occasional message, post on her wall, go through her albums. It felt too final (and too un-Emily) to memorialise it. I 'share' access with her mother (Susan) - meaning, her mother has her login and password and has spent a total of approximately three minutes on the website (or on a computer, total). After a little confusion, I assumed it was her.

November 16th, 2013. I had received confirmation from Susan that she hadn't logged in to Em's Facebook since the week of her death. Em knew a lot of people, so I instantly assumed this was one of her more tech savvy 'friends' fucking with me in the worst possible way.

I noticed pretty much immediately that whoever was chatting with me was recycling old messages from Em and my's shared chat history.

The 'the wheels on the bus' comment was from when we were discussing songs to play on a road trip that never eventuated. 'hello' happened a million times.

Around **February 2014**, Emily started tagging herself in my photos. I would get notifications for them, but the tag would generally always be removed by the time I got to it. The first time I actually caught one, it felt like someone had punched me in the gut. 'She' would tag herself in spaces where it was plausible for her to be, or where she would usually hang out. I've got screenshots of two (from April and June; these are the only ones I've caught, so they're a little out of the timeline I'm trying to write out):

http://i.imgur.com/X9G5agJ.png

http://i.imgur.com/55FwXKt.png

Around this period of time, I stopped being able to sleep. I was too angry to sleep.

She would tag herself in random photos every couple of weeks. The friends who noticed and said something thought it was a fucked up bug; I found out recently that there have been friends who have noticed and didn't say anything. Some of them have removed me from their Facebook friends list.

At this point, some of you may be wondering why I didn't just kill my Facebook profile. I wish I had. I did for a little while. On days when I can't get out there, though, it's nice having my friends available to chat. It's nice visiting Em's page when the little green circle isn't next to her name. I was already socially reclusive when Em was alive; her death turned me into something pretty close to a hermit, and Facebook and MMOs were (are) my only real social outlets.

On **March 15th,** I sent what I assumed was Em's hacker a message.

On March 25th, I received an 'answer'.

It wasn't until I was going over these logs a few months later that I noticed she was recycling my own words as well.

My response seems kind of lacklustre here. I was intentionally providing him/her with emotional 'bait' ('This is actually devastating') to keep them interested in their game; I was working off the assumption that the kind of person to do this would be the kind of person that would thrive on the distress of others. I was posting in tech forums, looking for ways to track this person, contacting Facebook. I needed to keep them around so I could gather 'evidence'.

Before anyone asks, yes, I had changed the password and all security info countless times.

16th of April. I receive this.

This seems like word salad. Like all our conversations so far, it's recycled from previous messages she's sent.

29th of April.

I hadn't discovered any leads. Facebook had told me the locations her page had been accessed from, but since her death, they're all places I can account for (my home, my work, her mum's house, etc). My response here wasn't bait. 'yo ask Nathan' was an in-joke too lame worth explaining, but seeing 'her' say it again just absolutely fucking crippled me. My reaction in real life was much less prettier. I'm not expecting my bond back.

Her last few messages had started to scare me, but I wouldn't admit it at this point.

8th of May. I don't really have the words for this.

'FRE EZIN G' is the first original word she's (?) made. This has given me nightmares that have only started to kick in recently. I keep dreaming that she's in an ice cold car, frozen blue and grey, and I'm standing outside in the warmth screaming at her to open the door. She doesn't even realise I'm there. Sometimes her legs are outside with me.

24th of May.

I wasn't actually drunk. She wasn't an affectionate girl, and it always embarrassed her to exchange 'I love you's, cuddle, talk about how much we meant to each other. She was more comfortable with it when I was boozed up. I got fake-drunk a lot.

Her reply is what prompted me to finally memorialise her page, thinking it might help curb this behaviour. It might seem innocuous compared to her previous message - it's pasted from an old conversation where I was trying to convince her to let me drive her home from a friend's.

In the collision, the dashboard had crushed her. She was severed in a diagonal line from her right hip to midway down her left thigh. One of her legs was found tucked under the backseat.

Going back in time. 7th of August, 2012.

These are logs from the day she died. She was usually home from work by 4.30. This, alongside a couple of voicemail messages, is the last time I talked to her under the assumption that she was alive. You'll see why I'm showing you these soon.

Yesterday. 1st of July, 2014.

I memorialised her page a couple of days after I received the message about walking. Until today, she'd been quiet; she wasn't even tagging herself in my photos.

I don't know what to do anymore. Do I kill her memorial page? What if it is her? I want to puke. I don't know what's happening.

I just heard a Facebook alert. I'm too afraid to swap windows and check it.

Room 733

by The_Dalek_Emperor

Winner - Best Single-Part Story of 2014

The Suicide Room. That's what they called room 733 - as if I didn't have enough to worry about on my first day as a freshman.

We had assigned to dorm room 734 which, it turns out, wasn't one of the nice add-on rooms in the south hall. No, we found ourselves in the older wing of the building on the 7th floor. I wasn't too bummed out, though; at least they'd honored my request to room with my best friend.

Lydia and I spent most of the morning moving ourselves in. By the time our Resident Advisor came by I was taping up posters and Lydia was reading.

"Hi girls, I'm Beth!" chirped the bubbly blonde girl as she bounded into our room. "I'll be your RA this year."

"Hi," I nodded at her.

"Wow, you girls really work fast," she said taking in our made beds and hung up clothes.

Beth picked up a drawing of Cthulhu that Lydia had done over the summer. She turned it sideways, studying it.

"Is this the kraken from Pirates of the Caribbean?"

Lydia glared at her over the top of her book.

"So anyway," the RA continued, "I know our hall isn't as new as the south hall but trust me, there's a lot of history here. This building is almost 60 years old."

"Yes, I can see that." I said looking around. "The rooms are pretty small."

"Well, people were smaller in the 50s." Beth shrugged.

"Really." Lydia said flatly.

"Yep, really." Beth pursed her lips and just continued to stand there, while the room filled with awkward silence.

"So," I said, "the corner room next to us - 733, is it? It looks a lot bigger than our room. Is anyone assigned to that room or could we maybe-"

"Oh, you don't want that room." Beth interrupted. "There were a couple suicides in there. A hanging and a jumper if I remember right. They're not assigning anyone to that room. Anyway, I'd just like to remind you that this is an all girls floor and guys are not allowed up here after 11."

Before we could reply to her Beth clapped her hands and with a quick "well, nice meeting you" she skipped out of the room.

Lydia dropped her book on the bed and stared out into the hall. "I hate her."

"Did you hear that bomb she fucking dropped?"

"I'm going to call her Dumbshit Beth."

"Lydia, seriously. Suicides?"

"Oh, Becca, relax. Every college campus has a few suicides."

"Yeah, but in the same room?"

Lydia sighed. "Really, who cares? It's not *our* room."

"Yeah, I guess." I turned to study the little window in our room. "Can you imagine climbing out of that tiny window and jumping? You'd be

alive for at least five seconds before you hit the ground."

"Oh, fuck, Becca, can you not?" Lydia glanced at the window and visibly shuddered. "You know I fucking hate heights and just talking about that shit is raising my blood pressure."

"We could always move into the suicide room," I teased her, "That one has a window on each wall."

"Fuck you."

"Okay, okay. But seriously, think about it. It would take a lot of commitment to squeeze out of that tiny window."

"Yeah, well, remember, people were apparently smaller back then." Lydia mumbled as she pushed her bed further away from the window.

Since Lydia was an outgoing and friendly person, we made friends at lightning speed. There were a lot of parties in those first few weeks, at one of which Lydia inevitably met a guy. I'd known the girl since we were in diapers so I fully anticipated her having a boyfriend by the end of September. His name was Mike and he wasn't anything special; just your standard frat pledge douche canoe.

After about a month on campus the novelty of college started wearing off. Lydia and I found our stride and we spent more weekends studying than drinking. Midterms were coming up in a couple weeks and I was determined to maintain a 4.0 GPA throughout my freshman year.

One night in early October I was woken up by a loud, grinding sound. I sat up in bed and strained to hear it again. Lydia was also wide awake and listening.

SLAM

What the fuck? She mouthed to me.

It wasn't unusual for there to be noise in the hallways since other people came in at all hours of the night. But this sound had definitely come from next door - the corner room.

GRIND

"Is that-"

"Yeah," Lydia whispered. "That's the window next door."

At Lydia's insistence, we kept our window closed at all times. However, there was no mistaking the sound of the window in room 733 being opened and closed again at regular intervals.

SLAM

"Who's in there?"

Lydia shrugged.

"Is someone fucking with us? Is this like initiation?"

Lydia raised her eyebrow at me. "Initiation to what?"

"I don't know. College? Maybe they're hazing the freshman?"

GRIND (it opened)

"Who is hazing freshman?"

I shrugged.

SLAM (it shut)

"Becca, I love you, but that was fucking stupid."

I threw a pillow at her. "Well, whoever it is, go tell them to knock it the fuck off."

"Me?! I'm not risking being thrown out a window."

GRIND

"Well, I'm not doing it!"

"I'm an art major. You're a political science major. YOU go lay down the law."

"Fuck that."

"Then call Dumbshit Beth. Isn't this the kind of nonsense she should deal with?"

SLAM

"I'm not calling her. Don't you put that evil on me"

"Fine," Lydia whispered loudly, "then we'll just have to ignore it."

"I have class at 7:30!" I whispered.

GRIND

"Then do something!"

"Ugh!" I got out of bed and stomped to the door, threw it open dramatically and went down the hall to pound on the door to room 733 which simply said 'Supply Room'.

"People are trying to sleep, please fucking stop." I said when there was no answer.

SLAM

"Dude, seriously..." I sighed.

I stepped back from the door and immediately noticed problem. Room 733 was padlocked shut from the outside. I hurried back to my room.

"What happened?" Lydia asked.

"I'm not going anywhere near that fucking room, again. It's locked from the outside; I don't know how anybody could get in there."

"So, you're saying it's a spooky ghost?" She laughed.

"No, I'm saying there is creepy shit going on inside a room colloquially called 'the Suicide Room'."

Lydia scoffed and rolled over to go back to sleep. "You should have been a drama major."

We didn't hear the window next door again that night but the next morning you could clearly see from outside that both windows in the corner room were now wide open.

I watched the windows on room 733 for an entire week but they remained open. Occasionally at night I thought I could hear a noise next door liked marbles dropping and rolling across the floor. Since it never woke Lydia up, I didn't bother to say anything.

One afternoon I was alone in the dorm editing notes on my laptop. I had my headphones in but the music wasn't loud enough to cover the noise of someone knocking on the door.

"Come in," I said without looking up from the screen.

A moment went by and then heard I heard the knocking again. I jerked my earbuds out and slammed the laptop closed.

I turned around, "Come-"

What the fuck? The door to the hallway was wide open. I'd left it open on purpose since Ian (a junior I was dating) was supposed to be stopping by. I heard the knocking again from behind me and literally jumped out of my chair.

It had come from the other side of the room – the closet door. It was the closet that shared a wall with room 733.

"Lydia, you're not fucking funny."

Nothing.

"Lydia, I swear to god, I will punch you in your face."

Silence. I walked over to the closet door and grasped the handle.

"Lydia, you're a fucking-"

"A fucking what?"

Her voice came from the doorway – behind me. I let go of the doorknob and stumbled back, wide-eyed. Lydia threw her stuff on the bed and turned to me, crossing her arms.

"I'm a fucking what?"

"I...thought you were hiding in the closet." I said, lamely.

"What? Why?"

"Because someone was knocking on the door."

"Jesus, Becca." Lydia rubbed her forehead and walked over to the closet, throwing open the door. There was nothing there but clothes and boxes. She made a swipe of her arm as if to say: 'what now?'

"I swear-"

"Becca, there's no one here."

"I know what I heard."

We glared at each other until our little stand off was interrupted by the timely arrival of Ian.

He immediately sensed the tension in the room. "Hi, ladies... What's new?"

I gave my roommate a hostile look. "There's strange shit is going on in that room next door. But that's not new."

'Which room? 735? Or the empty one?"

"The *empty* one." Lydia emphasized.

"733. Yeah, I'm not surprised. That's the suicide room."

"Right, we heard about the deaths." I sat down on my bed.

"Yeah, it's pretty fucked up. Three suicides all in one dorm room."

"Three?" Lydia raised her eyebrow. "We were told there were two."

"Well there were a couple people in the 70s and then some guy about ten years ago. He jumped out the window."

Lydia and I both shuddered. Although she was much worse, we were both terrified of heights. A falling death was about the worst thing I could think of.

"I will admit that three suicides in the same dorm room is fucking disturbing." Lydia said in an apologetic tone.

"Yeah, I heard there's something in that room." Ian said.

"Like what?"

"No one knows, but every year someone has a new theory, usually right around Halloween something gets published in the campus paper. Whatever is in there, though, it ain't friendly."

"So, has anyone ever killed themselves in the neighboring rooms? Like this one?"

"Nah, just 733. Honestly, I was surprised when I heard they were opening the north hall this year."

"They told us we were the biggest incoming freshman class in twenty years." I said absentmindedly.

"Yeah, I heard that, too. You know you could request a room change." Ian sat down on the bed next to me and I leaned against his shoulder.

"Yeah, but they wouldn't keep us together." Lydia cut in. "Becca and I have been best friends for 15 years. We can't room with other people."

"So should we just keep living here, next to Satan?" I glanced at the closet door again.

Lydia shrugged. "At least we'll have some stories to tell after graduation."

"These aren't the kind of stories I want to tell."

A few days later Lydia began to believe my closet story. I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of someone whispering. I looked over at Lydia, who was already staring at me with wide eyes. She slowly brought a finger to her lips.

I listened intently, trying to hear what the voice was saying and where it was coming from but I couldn't understand even one word. I got out of my bed and tiptoed over to Lydia's. The whispering was definitely louder over there, but then she shared a wall with room 733. I listened harder.

...never...taken...mouths...of fools...

What the hell? Lydia leaned over and put her ear up to the wall. The whispers suddenly stopped and I leaned closer. Suddenly there was a loud bang from the other side. Lydia immediately recoiled and clutched her ear in pain.

Someone was in there. Suddenly more angry than scared I again threw open our door and stomped over to the supposedly empty supply room. I banged on the door loudly not caring who else I woke up at this point.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" I yelled at the door. "This shit isn't funny anymore. Come out of that fucking room, you asshole."

Silence. And then the doorknob started to turn.

I don't know what I'd expected to happen but it wasn't that. I backed up so far from the door that I ran into the opposite wall. When the handle had turned all the way down, something started to push from the other side. The door groaned loudly but the locks held.

I held my breath until the pressure on the door subsided and the handle slowly returned to its normal position.

I noticed Lydia peaking her head out of our room. She held up her hands as if to say *what happened?*

"Someone thinks they're funny." I answered her out loud. She shook her head and disappeared back into our room.

I knelt down on the floor and brought my head down to the carpet, peering under the door crack. It was the first time I had seen into the corner room.

Room 733 was definitely a supply closet. There were chairs stacked along one wall and bed frames along the other. A few rotting mattresses were piled under one of the windows and a thick layer of dust covered everything in the room. The windows were absolutely huge, which was something you couldn't really tell by looking up at the building. There were open as always and I could definitely see how someone could easily climb through them to the outside ledge.

The room didn't look like it had been disturbed in a couple of decades which sent a shudder wracking through my body.

The moonlight, which had been providing enough light to see into the room, suddenly vanished and I saw only pitch black inside. I blinked rapidly trying to adjust my night vision. I squeezed my eyes shut and when I opened them, a large yellow eye was looking back at me, only a few inches away from my face on the other side of the door.

I screamed and woke up half the dorm.

There was no denying that things were escalating. The next morning Lydia and I put in dorm change requests with Resident Services and hoped for the best. In the meantime, we agreed to never be alone in our dorm room at night. Either we both spent the night at home or neither of us did. We started spending most nights with our respective boyfriends.

I told Ian everything that had happened and he suggested I maybe talk to the campus Paranormal Society. I hesitantly made an appointment and Lydia and I met with a small, cleanly dressed kid named Craig and four of his "colleagues" the following Tuesday.

We told them everything we could remember, every incident, no matter how small. Craig and the four other members of the Paranormal Society sat quietly and took notes for half an hour. It wasn't until we finished that anyone spoke.

"Is that all?" Craig asked.

"Yes..." I said slowly.

"Would you mind waiting out in the hall for a few minutes so that I may confer with my colleagues?"

"Sure," Lydia smiled indulgently and stood up. "Whatever you need."

The door had barely shut behind us when Lydia snorted and rolled her eyes. "Let's go."

"Go where?" I asked.

"Are you serious?"

"Lydia, come on, we need help, I am *freaking* out. We haven't stayed one night in our dorm since Thursday so this isn't something we can just brush off."

"Okay." She threw her hands up. "Let's hear what they have to say and then we can go over to Resident Services and check on our move requests."

We loitered out in the hallway for another 15 minutes before Craig came out and asked up to come back and take a seat.

With all the pomp and circumstance of a meeting of parliament, Craig cleared his throat and made his diagnosis.

"What you're dealing with, ladies, is a very angry ghost."

"Is that your professional opinion, Craig?" Lydia said. I shot her a look.

"Y-yes," he stuttered. "A vengeful spirit-"

"A spirit?" I asked. I very much doubted that that's what we were dealing with.

"Yes," answered one of the not-Craigs. "That's ghost to the layperson."

"Jesus Christ," Lydia groaned and rubbed her temples.

Mistaking Lydia's frustration with despair, Craig rushed right into his speech.

"Don't be afraid, ladies, we're going to take care of you. It's true that spirits can be quite a headache if you don't know how to exorcize them which is why it's good you came to us. Suicides almost always result in angry ghosts, they need revenge."

"Revenge on whom?" I asked.

"On other students. Perhaps this particular spirit was bullied into taking his own life and now seeks to torment others."

"Ah, listen-"

"We can take care of this for you right away, all we ask is a small donation to the society," Craig continued. "We honestly didn't realize that room was having this much activity. It's really very exciting."

"Great, well, thank you for your time," Lydia said as she grabbed my hand and pulled me out of my chair.

"Do you want to set something up for this weekend?" Craig asked.

"Tell you what, we'll call you."

Lydia hurried me out of the room wearing a weary look and we didn't speak again until we were almost to the Admin building.

"That was a waste of time." She said.

“Look, I’m not disagreeing with you, but-”

“Becca, tell me you didn’t honestly buy into that?”

“So you don’t think it’s a...a…” I was having trouble even saying the word, it sounded so ridiculous. “…ghost?”

“Well, I don’t fucking know, but neither do they. That guy had no idea what the fuck he was talking about.”

I pulled my hood lower over my eyes as we stepped into line at the Resident Services desk.

“Let me put it this way.” Lydia continued. “They’re playing Ghostbusters and we’re* living* the fucking Exorcist.”

"Fine,” I sighed. “Then what do you want to do? Just keep sleeping at Mike and Ian's until we get reassigned?”

“I just want this to end.” Lydia crossed her arms and stared straight ahead. We all wanted this to end. Even if living next to that fucking room wasn’t scary it was sure as hell distracting.

“Alright, well, I mean we're probably safe during daylight hours so as long as we don’t spend nights there we should be okay. Our room is only ghost adjacent after all, and our new assignments will come through soon." I checked my watch. “Fuck it’s almost 2.”

"Shit, really? I gotta go. Mike got accepted to Sigma Chi and he's getting initiated today."

"Oh yeah, I forgot he rushed."

The girl at the desk waved us forward. I hadn’t even realized we’d reached the front of the line.

“Let me know what they say,” Lydia said as she ran out the door.

The girl at the desk eyed me suspiciously as I approached.

“Hi, I’m-“

“You’re the girl trying to move out of 734 in Reilly, aren’t you?”

She’d caught me off guard. “Yeah, one of them. How’d you know?”

“Sorry, I overheard you. I also saw your file cross my desk a few days ago and I gotta ask: why are you looking to transfer rooms, exactly?”

I was tired. I was beaten down. I didn’t have the energy to think of a lie.

“Because shit is going on in the empty room next door and it’s really freaking us out. Noises, whispers, knocking, the other night I saw someone...”

“You saw someone?”

“Yeah.”

“In room 733?”

“Yeah. I looked under the door. There was definitely someone in there.”

The girl narrowed her eyes at me for a moment and then nodded for no particular reason.

“Well, your rooms aren’t ready yet but I’ve pushed them through as a priority. For right now you’re stuck, though. There just isn’t anywhere else to put you.”

I sighed. I’d figured as much.

“I’m Alice,” she continued, “and, look, I’ve actually done a lot of research on the Reilly suicides and I think I can help you. Or at the very least offer some insight.”

“Really?” I asked, hesitantly.

“Absolutely. I’m in Taylor Hall, room 310. I’ll be back to my dorm by 4 today."

"Thanks. We just came from the Paranormal Society on campus. “

“Ugh, say no more,” Alice rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, so…I’ll definitely see you at 4.”

“Great,” Alice said, and smiled.

I was early to Taylor, but then so was she. I told our story for the second time that day and Alice wasn’t afraid to interrupt with questions, though her queries didn’t betray her thoughts.

When I was finished she leaned back in her chair and sighed deeply.

"I can’t believe it,” she shook her head. “I’d always heard rumors but I honestly doubted any of it was true.”

“I can assure you – everything I’ve told you is absolutely true.”

“And how is it now? When you’re there?”

“We aren’t ever there at night but during the day we’ve heard scratching on the wall, really quiet whispering and sometimes we still hear the window opening and closing. In broad fucking daylight. However every time I look up from the street the windows to 733 are open.”

Alice nodded. “Well, for the record I don’t think you’re in any danger. As much as it sucks, you guys are simply a casualty. You just need to stay out of room 733.”

I snorted. “Are you kidding? I would never go in there.”

"I believe that you believe that. But this thing, whatever it is, it's tricky. Manipulative. A *liar*. And it's smarter than you."

"I'll try not to be offended by that."

"You shouldn't be."

“What do you think it is?”

“Something very old and very evil.”

I regarded her skeptically and then let my eyes wander around the room. I hadn’t really noticed the décor before but to say Alice had an interest in the occult was an understatement.

"I can't see any situation where I would be compelled to enter that room."

"I know. But you have to be prepared that there may come a time when you have to make a *decision* about entering that room. Because what you’re dealing with? It’s already killed five people.”

"Five?! I thought it was three!"

"Yeah, well, not everyone is inclined to do the level of research that I do. Let’s see, there was Ellen Burnham in 1961 – she jumped out the window. She was the very first. And then Tad Collinsworth in 1968 - he jumped, too. Marissa Grigg in 1975, she hung herself. Erin Murphy in 1979 - she jumped. And then Erik Dousten in 1992 - he hung himself."

"Five suicides. How could the university still let people live in there?”

"They don’t, apparently. That’s why it’s a supply room.”

“And back then?”

“Well, every few years, once everyone who would remember had graduated, the room would be reassigned. This was before the internet, you know, and the incoming freshman were clueless. But after that last one - Erik Dousten - they closed the entire north hall of the 7th floor and built more rooms onto the south hall."

"So, what does it want?"

Alice shrugged. "Chaos. Death. Souls. Who knows? No one even knows what it *is*."

"Okay, so what *do* we know?"

"We know that it's somehow bound to that room though it seems to have minimal influence just outside of it. We know that everyone who ever died was alone at the time. And we know that it's a trickster. That's what we know."

It wasn't enough. "Why do you think they do it?" I asked quietly.

"The victims?"

I nodded.

"All I know is what's rumored to be in the evidence files. All the suicides were found with pictures or writings that were considered 'unspeakable' at the time. They contained horrible, evil things that would make you physically sick to read or see, they say."

"And these people, they drew them? They wrote that stuff?"

"Yep. Whatever is in that room drove them mad."

"That's fucking terrifying."

"Have you guys considered getting somebody to bless the room?"

"Jesus."

"Well you'll have a hard time getting him but perhaps some other sort of holy person."

"No, I mean, Jesus, you're talking about an exorcism."

Alice shrugged. "Maybe. The rumor in the 70s was that this all started with a Ouija board game gone wrong in 1961."

"Really? That shit's made by Hasbro."

"Not in the 60s it wasn't. Anyway, it's just a rumor. The only person on campus who would know is Tom Moen in Admin. I've tried to talk to him before but he refuses to see me."

"Did he go here in 1961?"

"Yes. And he was staying in Reilly."

"We need to talk to him. I need to know what the fuck is happening or I won't be able to live the rest of my life as a well adjusted person."

"I suppose we can try to chase him down on campus."

"Can we talk to him tomorrow?"

"We can try."

Mr. Moen wouldn't see us that day or the next. We tried to catch him on his lunch hour and then again while he was leaving work but he got around us every time. It was soon clear that the old man was actively avoiding us.

Lydia and I had seen little of each other since we'd continued to sleep in other dorms. I went back to our room twice a day - once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Usually the other room was silent but that didn't make me feel better. I could always sense something on the other side of the wall, somehow watching me. It felt like the calm before the storm.

The Thursday before Halloween I came back to the dorm to shower in the evening, much later than usual. I'd seen Lydia that afternoon and she'd informed me that she had enough clothes stored at Mike's to last until graduation so I knew I'd be there alone.

I showered down the hall in the safety of the bathrooms and then walked back to my room to change. I was supposed to meet Ian in half an hour to head out to a party and I wanted to get out of here as quick as possible.

Since the silence was unnerving me, I threw my iPod on the docking station and turned up AC/DC.

I got dressed and then stood in front of the mirror to dry my hair. I flipped my head over and blow dried upside down to try and give my hair some volume. When I flipped my head back up and shut off the blow-dryer I immediately noticed the silence in the room. But that wasn't all

I noticed.

I wasn't in my dorm anymore. Behind me was reflected the dusty bedframes and large open windows of room 733. I spun around in a panic to find that I was actually standing in my own room. I looked back at the mirror to see that 733 still reflected there. A slight movement behind me was all it took to make me run.

I grabbed my purse and phone and I fled from my room slamming the door behind me. On the elevator ride down I called Alice.

"I can't do it anymore," I said when she picked up. "I can't go back in that room, again. I can't ever go back."

"What happened?"

I told her.

"Jesus. What do you want to do?" She asked.

"I need to talk to someone who knows what the fuck is going on. Is Tom Moen the only person we know was here in 1961?"

"The only one I know of. Maybe we can get him on his way in tomorrow morning? We'll just corner him and refuse to move until he tells us something. He comes in at 6:30 according to the schedule I have. Do you want to meet me outside the Starbucks in the Atrium?"

"Fuck yeah I do. I have a class at 7:30 but I'll blow it off."

"Okay. See you then."

I wasn't usually much for parties but I was glad I was going to one that night. As soon as we got there I asked Ian to get me a drink. Since I wasn't usually much of a drinker he gave me a raised eyebrow. I gave him a brief synopsis of what had happened earlier, hoping he wouldn't think I was crazy.

Ian made me a scotch and coke. It was the first of many.

Around midnight I went to have a cigarette and checked my phone. I had a voicemail from Lydia left at 11:04pm.

"Hey Becca, listen I just, ugh, I just had a huge fucking fight with Mike. He, well, I guess his frat decided that for Halloween this year all the new brothers have to spend the night in the Suicide Room. In our dorm. I just, I can't fucking take it. He knows what's been going on with us and he still agreed to do this. He's now trying to convince me that Sigma Chi is behind all of the stuff going on in room 733 because they've been trying to drum up buzz for their Halloween deal. I can't-"

I hit end and threw my phone in my bag. No wonder Lydia was pissed. This was not good. Not good at all.

I found Ian inside and asked him to take me home. I was suddenly very stressed, very tired and very drunk.

When the alarm went off at 6am, it took everything I had to pull myself out of bed. I got dressed in the clothes I'd worn the night before and shuffled my way across campus to the Atrium.

Alice was already there with a black coffee in hand.

"I figured you'd need this," she laughed.

"How'd you know?"

"Your texts."

"I texted you last night?"

"Yeah, at about 1. You told me about Sigma Chi."

"Oh, god, yeah." I pushed my sunglasses higher up my nose and pulled my hood lower over my eyes.

"Those guys are idiots. Remember how I told you that it's crafty? Well what if the point of messing with you was to make 733 provocative, you know, to seduce people into going inside. No one has been in that room for years, can you imagine how hungry that thing is?"

"Do you think they're really at risk?" I asked as I sat down on the steps to the Admin building.

"Yeah. In fact the *only* thing they have going for them is that all those suicide victims were alone at the time of their deaths."

"So, it'll be less powerful with all of them there?"

"Theoretically. We would know a lot more if we knew what it was. And we can't know what it is without knowing how it got here. And that is why we need Moen."

"What time is he supposed to get here?"

"Actually, twenty minutes ago," Alice said, grimly.

It was another half an hour before we resigned ourselves to the fact that Mr. Moen had snuck around us as usual. We went to the front office hoping to beg again for an appointment with him anyway.

The woman at the Admin desk regarded us coldly.

“Tom isn't coming in today. Or any other day for that matter. He quit yesterday. Looks like you won’t be harassing him anymore."

"We weren't harassing him,” I said. “We just desperately needed to talk to him."

“We still do.” Added Alice.

"Well you won’t get any of his personal information from me," she said snidely and walked away.

"What the fuck do we do now?" I asked Alice.

"Without Tom Moen there's nothing left to do."

"Alice, fuck, I can't go back into that room.

"Well, then I guess it’s good your transfers came through."

"They did?!"

"Yep. I got the notice when I checked my work email this morning. You're going to Morton and Lydia is going to Tinsley."

"Oh thank god."

"I thought you'd be happy about that. I also convinced my boss not to assign anyone else to room 734.”

"Thank fuck."

“The only thing is you won’t be able to move until Monday."

"I can last through the weekend, especially now that the end is in sight. I have to tell Lydia."

I opened my phone to pull up Lydia's number but my attention was caught by the red ‘1’ badge over the voicemail logo. I hit play. It was the rest of the message from last night.

"-even look at his dumb fucking face anymore so I'm going to head home. Don't worry about me, I'll be okay. I’m drunk enough to sleep through any bullshit from next door. I'm just so fucking pissed off right now. I would honestly rather deal with Dumbshit Beth than Michael-My-Parents-Must-Be-Siblings-Because- I'm-That-Fucking-Retarded-Benson. Let’s hang out tomorrow. Love ya!"

The message ended.

"Goddamn it."

Alice gave me a questioning look.

"Lydia spent the night in our dorm."

Alice cringed.

"She's safe though, right?"

"As long as she doesn't go into 733."

"She wont." I thought of the always open large windows of the corner room. If nothing else the mere thought of those would keep Lydia the hell out of that room.

"Good. Well, since we have nothing else to do, do you want to go look for theology books in the library? It's pretty much the only thing open right now. "

"Sure," I shrugged. I didn't have another class until 10.

The little old lady who sat behind the library's checkout desk must have been 1,000 years old. Ms. Stapley's eyes were small and watery and her skin looked like it was melting off of her skull. Still, she was nice and knowledgeable and she sent us in the right direction for books on demonology, though she gave us a curious look as she did.

There wasn't much. We read everything we could but it either wasn't relevant or wasn't in English. We returned to her desk 30 minutes later.

"Ah, do you have anything on the occult?"

"The occult? Ah..." Her voice trailed off. "Yes, I do. Over there to the left of the reference section."

"Ok thanks. Sorry, I'm too hung-over to use the Dewey decimal system," I said.

"I don't think she likes the look of us," Alice whispered as we walked away.

"Our look or our subject matter?"

"Probably neither."

Within the hour we were back up at her desk having struck out again. We could tell she was getting annoyed as her eyes narrowed suspiciously at us as we approached.

"Ah, sorry, do you know where we could find something on séances or Ouija boards or-"

"Now listen, girls." Ms. Stapley stood up from her desk and looked over her glasses at us. "I really hope this is for class."

"It is," I said.

"It's not," Alice answered simultaneously. "It's personal research."

"Research? What kind of research?"

"Look, we're not going to mess with a Ouija board or anything…" I said.

"Good," Ms. Stapley smoothed her pleated pants and sat back down. "Because I can't have that sort of thing going on here again."

"*Again?*" Alice latched on.

The older woman suddenly looked very uncomfortable and started fidgeting with a stack of books on her desk.

"We may have something on séances in-"

"Ms. Stapley, we're researching what happened in Reilly in 1961." Alice interrupted.

"And also what's been happening there ever since."

"Well, it's no secret, is it? A student committed suicide in that room. Dreadful but not unheard of on a university campus."

"Five students." I corrected her.

"But you know that, right?" Alice was suddenly talking very fast. "Because you sound like you're well versed in this story. Please, tell us how this started and we might be able to end it."

"End it?" Ms. Stapley's voice became quieter but more concentrated. "Don't be so arrogant, young lady. You can't end it. People have always died in that room and they always will. There is no end to it so you'd best stay far away from it."

"But maybe if we knew how this all started -"

"It started just as you think it did. But everyone that was involved is either very old or very dead by now. Just stay away from that room. Concentrate on your studies."

I leaned over her desk. "Well, I'd love to but they assigned my friend and me to the room next door. Maybe you can forget about all the suicides but we can't. It wont fucking let us."

"Young lady, I never forget." Ms. Stapely voice was even quieter now. "My friend Ellen was the very first to be killed in that room. She was my very best friend and not a night goes by that I don't imagine her wiggling out of that tiny window, standing upon the cold ledge in her bare feet and jumping off the 7th floor of that building."

Alice sighed. "I'm really sorry. I didn't know."

"Yes, well these are old wounds, my dear. Now girls, I suggest you request a room reassignment immediately. No one should be living on the seventh floor of that building. And that's all I'm going to tell you about it. "

Alice sighed but resigned herself to a nod. We wouldn't learn anything more here. Still, it was quite a breakthrough - at least we had *some* information now.

Alice walked away and I made to follow her but my feet wouldn't move. Something was bothering me - a small yet poignant word had been buried in Ms. Stapley's story; a word that suddenly seemed very important.

"Eh, Ms. Stapley," I asked the tired, old woman at the desk, "Why did you refer to the windows in 733 tiny? Because I've seen those windows and they're huge, like 5 feet tall."

"Dear, you're thinking of the corner room, that's the supply closet. Room 733 is next door to that."

"No-no," I stuttered, "that's room 734."

"Yes, well, it is *now*. When they built the additional rooms on to the south hall they moved all the room numbers down."

Oh my god. I suddenly felt very hot and very dizzy.

"That sneaky fucker," Alice whispered next to me, her skin paling.

"Lydia."

We took off across the campus at a dead run, witnessed only by the few bleary-eyed students on their way to morning classes. When Reilly finally came into view I stumbled on the pavement as my blood turned to ice. From our vantage point we could clearly see the windows of the corner room were closed – the first and only time I had ever seen that way. And the window to my room was open.

We ran into the lobby, pushing past several latte-sipping, ugg boot-wearing freshman who had just gotten off the elevator. I hit 7 and watched the doors close more slowly than they ever had before. I leaned against the wall, trying to steady my breathing.

"Alice, how the fuck did this happen?"

"I don't know. I don't fucking know."

"She's been in there all night, Alice. In our room. Alone."

Alice shook her head but had nothing to say.

When the doors finally opened on floor 7, we saw a quiet, deserted hallway. I ran toward my room with Alice right behind me. Rounding the corner, I threw open my door hoping it wasn't locked. And it wasn't.

Lydia looked back at me. And for one breathless moment, cruel glimmer of hope crossed over her tear streaked face.

But it was too late. The next second, she leaned forward so slightly, and she was gone.

She screamed the entire way down.

Alice ran to the ledge where Lydia had just been while I stood motionless. She stuck her head out the window and looked down just as a different kind of screaming started from the bottom floor. Alice closed her hand over her mouth and pulled her head back into the room as tears of shock ran down her ghost- white face.

The screaming from outside got louder as more people saw what remained of my best friend on the cold pavement. I leaned back against the dresser and slumped to the floor. A falling death. Lydia never wanted a falling death.

I absentmindedly picked up one of the pictures that were strewn all over the floor. It was a picture of Lydia's mother. She was dead. I picked up another picture. It was Lydia's baby sister. She was dead, too. There were dozens of pictures just like it all over the floor - Lydia has been busy last night. As for the things depicted in them, I cannot tell you. Lydia was a talented artist and I only saw a few before I got sick on the floor next to me.

Alice was standing in the doorway yelling something down the hall. I don't know what she was saying because all I could hear was a high pitched whine in the room. Suddenly a piece of paper slid out from under the crack in the closet door and glided across the floor toward me. I picked it up and studied it for a moment.

This was drawn by Lydia too, but it wasn't like the others. It was a picture of the closet from my exact vantage point. In the drawing the door was cracked and there was something looking back from the darkness.

I put the paper down and studied the closet. The door was cracked open just like the picture. I squinted my eyes and tried to see inside. Just as I started to distinguish the defined lines of a long face looking back at me, Alice pulled me to my feet.

"We need to get out of here," I thought I heard her say.

I never went back into that room. My parents moved my things and I spent the rest of the semester in an apartment off campus. I transferred to an out of state school for my spring semester and finished my degree there.

Every night I dream of Lydia pulling herself through the tiny window, shimmying out onto the cold ledge, standing up and knowing there's nothing between her body and the terrifying abyss in front of her. I watch her look down seven stories to the black pavement below and realize, though not accept, her terrible fate. I see the blind horror cross her familiar features. I hear her wildly pounding heart, desperately trying to race through every beat of the life she should have lived, and knowing it has only mere seconds.

I watch her look back at me. And I watch her fall.

It's been 9 years since that night. And every fall semester for 9 years I've called Resident Services to see which dorms are open for new student assignments. Reilly is always open. The seventh floor is closed.

This year life and work got in the way and I called much later than usual. I was put on hold immediately.

"Resident Services." A man finally answered. "Were you the one asking about open rooms in Reilly?"

"Yes, that's me."

"We're entirely filled up and there's a waiting list for Reilly. But, as it happens, you actually have great timing. I make no promises but we may be able to get you in. We just got approval this morning."

"Approval for what?" I said slowly

"We're opening up the seventh floor."

C.W.

My daughter died on her sixth birthday. A man just handed me photos of her seventh.

by somethingstraange

Runner Up - Best Single-Part Story of 2014

I cannot describe to you how I feel right now. What I'm experiencing is so detached from the normal, I'm almost convinced I've finally gone insane.

Almost.

My wife, Bea, died during childbirth. She was gorgeous, funny, intelligent – stubborn. A woman whose laugh was so loud eating in restaurants was a challenge, and whose stare was so intense it made my hands shake. I lost her, as she gave birth to our daughter.

Sam.

Of course, I could have resented Sam. For taking away what was once mine in a way nothing else can be. For taking what was so truly and utterly pure. But I didn't. I knew Bea wouldn't have wanted any resentment. She wouldn't have wanted our only child to have a life ruined by hate.

But this isn't about grief. This isn't about the physical sucker punch of losing forever something you loved. This is about something far more sinister.

My daughter was lively, always running and screaming, leaping up and down the climbing frame – causing havoc in her nursery classes. So for her sixth birthday, a trip with friends to the movies had left her so pent up with energy I could barely keep up with her as she dipped and dodged between people on the pavement. She'd occasionally turn back, through the sea of people and shout "Daddy, come on!" in a tone that was almost petulant. I couldn't help but love her.

I tried to chase her, I really did. She was too busy looking at me when she dashed out into the road, and the bus didn't have time to stop. A sickening crunch, and the world fell silent. I cradled her broken form in my arms, too numb to weep, too hurt to move. All I could feel was the warm blood gently seep into my clothes. In the state of shock I was in, I could just think about how I was going to wash my jeans. It sounds horrid, I know – but a loss like that tears everything away from you and leaves you with only the bare thought process that make us human.

The next week was a blur. I cannot place a single memory to a time, in between friends and family extending their condolences, and the howling sobs of mine that would break out at any moment – a door slamming, the gentle hum of the fridge or voices laughing on the radio.

I attended her funeral dressed all in black. By dressed, I don't mean merely clothes, my very essence was dark. I couldn't feel, or think and the day continued as I went through the motions, like a dying man treading water. Everyone wanted to tell me about Sam, and how perfect she was – what an angel she was, as if I didn't know. As if I didn't realise what a gift my own daughter was.

The man, stood out from the rest, as he walked up to me and handed me this large leather book. I assumed, at the time, he was a parent of one of Sam's friends, handing me a collection of their photos together. Or maybe I was too numb to even process his cold hands, and how he never mentioned my daughter once.

For a month, I was lost. I drank, and stayed in our now empty apartment alone, watching old boxsets – too numb now to even cry. It was only when my sister arrived, when she held my hand and talked to me that I began to come out of my shell. She'd sit and listen to the most inane things I said, and gently coaxed me out of my depression. Not completely, but enough for me to begin to live what was almost a real life again.

That was when I opened the book. I'd decided to remember Sam for all the joy she gave, and was prepared to reflect on her life without feeling miserable.

I opened to the first page. It was essentially a binder, full of Polaroid photos of my daughter growing up. I furrowed my brow. They were taken from a distance, blurred slightly – and I was in a few of them.

I began to feel sick, but hoped that the following photos would provide some explanation. I came up with every excuse of how the man obtained these photos, desperate to view the moments of my daughter's life without a sense of trepidation. The photos grew closer and closer to my daughter's birthday. I could see the day I gave her a tiny bike after she turned five, and the skinned knees that ensued. The book had so many more pages, that I assumed the rest were empty.

But there was a photo of her just before the movies on her sixth birthday - I could recognise the pink raincoat she insisted on wearing, and my hands on her shoulders.

There was no photo of the crash.

Instead, her life continued inside this book. Her seventh birthday had a photo of me and her in the garden, covered in paint – with a huge canvas on the floor and an extremely messy painting. Her seventh birthday.

Her seventh birthday.

The reality of what I was seeing hit me then and I slammed the book shut. I sat there, at the kitchen table staring at the leather. This must be some sadistic photoshop, I hoped, someone had taken the time to pull a horrid prank on me. I say I hoped, because essentially – I couldn't believe the other explanation. If there even was one.

Gritting my teeth, I decided I had nothing to lose and kept reading.

I can't explain the emotions I felt whilst I read accurately, listening to the sound of the page turning. I can try, but nothing could prepare you for something like this.

Her life continued, showing her losing her baby teeth, her first day of senior school. My turning of the pages became more frenzied, and I began to notice something. The photographer was getting closer. Closer to her. As she grew older – not in every photo, but a general trend – the photographer was getting closer and closer. More daring, perhaps.

She was beautiful. Stunning. As a teenager she looked just like her mother, all curls and smiles. I grew older too, but the photos began to include me less and less.

Her sixteenth birthday was strange. A group of her friends, sitting outside, drinking from little plastic cups at a picnic. But there was someone in the background. Near the bushes of the park where this was taken, a dark figure stood. You wouldn't have noticed him, if not for the small shadow he cast on the grass.

I leant back for a moment and exhaled. This was too weird. I'd been so caught up in watching my little girl grow up I hadn't thought about how this would end. Moments like this, are so utterly surreal that sometimes you remove yourself from them. I almost felt like I was watching myself read these, like this was a dream, or a program on the television.

I continued.

The dark figure became more and more present in each photograph. I could almost make out features. His presence was towering, and as I turned the page I expected to see him disappear. But instead, as the photographs grew closer to her eighteenth (each birthday was marked by a caption underneath the Polaroid saying "Another year.") she was no longer somewhere I recognised.

Instead, the photos were of her in a dimly lit house. Her face contorted by fear, striking all sorts of weird poses. Sometimes she would be dressed like an ancient queen or she would be dressed like a maid scrubbing the floors, the figure was there even closer now. His legs, or his arm would appear in each and every one. No matter how she was dressed, in every photo her face had this desperately pained expression. It killed me. There were bruises on her face. She looked thin, ill even.

I couldn't do it.

This was sick. Properly sick.

My girl.

I soldiered on.

The last photo I looked at, before I slammed the book shut and swore to never, ever look at it again was of her eighteenth. The caption underneath read "At last!" in sloppy writing.

She was looking straight at the camera, crying. She was on her knees, dressed in a black evening dress – with an apple in her mouth and her hands bound behind her back. Her makeup was ruined by her tears. It was as if she was pleading me, begging me to help. But I couldn't.

I closed the book and left the room, my whole body convulsing with sobs.

I couldn't call the police, of course. She was dead.

The thing that keeps me up at night, isn't the content of what I saw.

It’s that there were so many pages left.

Infected Town

by vainercupid

Winner - Best Multi-Part Story of 2014

Infected Town

Part 1

I'm a self-proclaimed explorer. I love the rush of entering places people rarely go, seeing things people rarely see. Given that I live in a large city, most of what I do is urban exploration - which generally consists of breaking into abandoned buildings and snapping picture after picture. You've probably seen some of my material on /r/abandonedporn or /r/urbanexploration, but I'm not linking them. I'm using this throwaway account to tell my story, so no one I know can call me crazy.

For me, and I'm sure you guys can appreciate this sentiment, it's always been "the creepier, the better." Some of my favorite buildings to explore have been abandoned mental institutions or sanitariums, where the ghost stories write themselves. I've never seen a ghost, however. Before last week I didn't believe in anything paranormal at all. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The reason I've decided to break my silence after a year of lurking on this sub (I'm a big nosleeper), is because last week I decided to go on a road trip. I needed a breath of fresh air, a break from personal bullshit. So I decided to visit my best friend down in San Francisco for a change of scenery.

The drive from my coastal city (bet you can guess which one) takes 12 hours on the southbound freeway. But I adore driving, especially alone, so I planned to use mainly back roads - the scenic route, if you will, winding through small towns and wilderness. If I saw anything interesting, be it an old cabin in the woods or a charming small town diner, I'd stop and check it out. This extended my trip by a significant amount. I wound up driving six or seven hours that first day.

Near sunset I started looking for a motel, but all I saw were trees and empty road. I refused to check my phone for a place to stay, liking the spontaneity and false sense of 21st century danger. I was content in knowing I was going south and would reach civilization eventually.

The sun was disappearing behind the trees and a light rain began to fall, typical for this time of year. I took my eyes off the road for a second, fumbled with the cigarette lighter, and realized it was getting a little too dark to see. I flicked on the headlights, glanced out the windshield, and immediately slammed on the breaks.

My car skidded a few feet in the rain but luckily stopped before it hit the jersey barriers that had been set up across the road. They sprang up out of nowhere. No warning signs, no "Road Closed Ahead." Just four low concrete walls all the way across the two lanes. They would have seriously fucked up my car if I hadn't seen them in time. I'd been going 45. I caught my breath, wondering how many people had almost crashed as I did. Probably not many. I hadn't seen a single other car for the past two hours.

A sad, dented detour sign pointed towards a road branching off to the right, through the trees, doubtlessly leading back towards the freeway. But my eyes were drawn to the road beyond the barriers. There was no sign of construction of any kind. The road was empty, and the pavement looked exactly as old as the one I'd just been traveling.

My decision was not a difficult one. Carefully, ignoring the detour, I maneuvered my car along the narrow strip of gravel to the right of the barriers and, quite easily, drove past them. I drove for about thirty minutes, with no sign of construction or life of any kind. It was growing steadily darker, and I was getting unsettled - but that only increased my curiosity. What was at the end of this closed road?

When I crested a hill, I was greeted with the sight of a few buildings and a large wooden sign.

"WELCOME TO _____" it said. I'm not omitting the name or doing anything cheeky. As to what the town's called, I'm as curious as you are.

I couldn't read the name, or any of the other words. Most of the sign from the center down was covered in what looked like splotchy black paint, or maybe some kind of plant life. It was difficult to tell in the falling darkness, but you could see that the boards at the bottom were chipped and scratched, like an animal had gotten to it. Not anything from a monster movie, just the common weathering of old wood left in the forest. But there were man-made scratches in it, too, gouged deeply into the wood over the black paint. I leaned out the window and pointed my flashlight at it.

“COME IN”

Weird. But I’ve seen much worse graffiti in ghost towns, which I assumed this was. That got my heart pumping with excitement.

I drove into town, past quite a few promising locations, all dark and empty. A police station, its windows shattered and subsequently boarded, the glass still glittering on the sidewalk. Houses with doors broken off the hinges and crooked shutters. A grocery store, where one street lamp still burned eerily green by the entrance. An apartment building, the glass of its double doors and all the windows apparently painted that with the same splotchy black as the town sign.

Though my fingers were twitching, I didn’t get out of the car. It was getting dark, and I was getting tired. I was alone and had no information on this ghost town. I wasn’t about to break into places if they were occupied, especially at night with nothing but a flashlight.

Because that’s the thing. The town didn’t have the air of fifty years of abandonment. Besides the boards across doors and windows and the lack of electric light, this place looked like it could have been inhabited yesterday. There was no building decomposition or crumbling masonry, at least from what I could see. No graffiti anywhere that would have marked the presence of other people, besides the black paint. The architecture was modern and generally holding up pretty well.

Was this really a ghost town? It must be. I didn’t see a single other person. All cars were parked and dusty, all businesses looked closed. This is probably my imagination, but from the moment I drove past the sign, I felt eyes on me from all directions. I didn’t feel welcome here, though I was sure there was no one to be bothered.

And then there was the smell. It was faint but ever present, floating on the wind as my car crept down Main Street - that stale, earthy scent of old basements and wet, dark places. Mold. The town smelled like mold.

I sped up, deciding to drive through the town and continue south. I’d find a place to stay nearby and return in the morning to do a bit of proper exploring. The apartment building and the police station were especially tempting. I’d never explored a police station before.

I was just about to cross the bridge that marked the south border of town, leaving the buildings behind and continuing into the woods, when I saw someone walking down near the creek. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. I’d thought I was alone.

I stopped the car but didn’t get a very good look in the gathering twilight before she - if it was a she - disappeared under the bridge. She was very, very thin - starvation status, I’m sure of it - and walked with a pronounced limp. She had a pale head, mostly bald, but near the top of her scalp were growing a few scattered clumps of thin, wispy brown hair. It was really long - it went over her shoulders and down her back. A filthy dress hung off her frame.

I watched her for a moment with my mouth open, then sped across the bridge when she disappeared from sight. She hadn’t looked up at me, even though my headlights had been shining at her. Part of me thought I should see if I could help her, but most of me was screaming that that was a bad idea. I’m a lone, unarmed woman, and I didn’t know who or what was under that bridge. Trust your gut, they say.

I reached another set of barriers further down the road, with another detour sign leading oncoming traffic towards the freeway. It seemed these barriers had been set up specifically to cordon off the town. Why?

I found a motel near the freeway and a small gas station. I decided to stay the night and go back first thing tomorrow. I called my friend in San Francisco and excitedly explained my discovery and why I might be another day late. Now that I was out of the town, I brushed off the feeling of unease. It had been quiet and eerie, and that lady was creepy as hell, but with the freeway only ten miles away I figured a transient had wandered along. Maybe she was squatting in the town, but dealing with homeless people is part of the adventure.

So yes, I went back. There’s a lot more to this story, and soon you’ll understand why I’m posting this to /r/nosleep as opposed to a different sub, but this is getting long. I think I’ll save the rest for next time. Sorry this wasn't too exciting.

I googled ghost towns in Oregon, but nothing fit the description. Does anyone who lives around there have any idea about the history of this place? Sorry I can’t give you a name. But maybe you’ve come across a creepy little village, too. One that seems abandoned and smells like mold.

Part 2

Apparently a place that closely resembles the town I explored is mentioned in a previous series of stories. After reading about what happened to Jess, Liz and Alan, I'm getting a bit worried.

The thing is, I can't take all your advice about not returning to Infected Town. I did all of this last week, before heading into California. I'm currently safe in San Francisco with no signs of moldiness.

When last we left off, our plucky heroine (yours truly) planned to spend the night in the motel and return to Creepyville in the morning to do a bit of true exploring.

I asked the gas station attendant about the ghost town up the road. He said he used to get a lot of regulars from up that way, but not for a while. Then the road got closed. There used to be a few more signs and some police tape, he said, and he'd seen a couple cop cars parked by the barriers. I asked him the name of the village, but he said he didn't know. I thought that was really weird; why wouldn't you know the name of a town half an hour away?

"There's nothing up that way," he said as I left. Oh good. My own personal Harbinger of Doom.

The next morning I got up and packed my backpack. Flashlights, extra batteries, gloves, an N95 respirator in case of mold or asbestos, some rope, a fuck ton of glow sticks, a few flares, a basic first aid kit and my Swiss Army knife. Plus bottled water. I also brought my handy-dandy crowbar. It was heavy but worth lugging around in the face of a stuck door or window.

Like an idiot, I'd left my camera at home. I'd mourned this since the night before, when I looked in my bag and found it missing. I was sure I'd packed it, having planned to explore a couple places my friend knew of in San Francisco, but it's probably sitting on my bed at home, all lonely and sad. I took a couple pictures in the town with my phone, but none of them turned out. Terrible lighting, I guessed at the time.

So. The first exploration. That feeling of being watched returned immediately upon crossing the bridge into the village, and as I drove towards the buildings the scent of mold did, as well. Faint but eternally present.

My first stop was the police station.

I weighed the pros and cons of breaking into a government building, but not for long. I was too eager. The town was as empty as ever, after all. I parked in the lot behind the station, beside a few dusty squad cars.

I guess the building should be called more of a sheriff's office than an actual police station. It's a low, tan colored building with a ground floor and a basement. The windows in the back aren't busted like the front, but they're grimy. Spots of black adorn the corners of most of them, which I soon discovered was some kind of mold. I've never seen mold like it, though.

I tried the front doors first, in case people were actually in the building, but they were locked. I swung around back where I'd seen a metal maintenance door when I parked. It had been firmly shut, I remembered, and I didn't have much hope for it. Already planning to try to pry open a window, I came around the corner of the building.

The maintenance door was open. I blinked. Yes, there it was, open just a crack. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it before, but brushed it off.

Breathing deeply, I pulled open the door and was met with the stifling smell of mold. I got the N95 out of my bag and affixed it to my face in case of spores. I stepped inside the building after wedging the door open with a heavy rock.

The hallway I stood in had a bathroom to my immediate right and a custodial supply closet to my left. It led into a large office area, with many doors and cubicles. There were three small jail cells in the northeast corner, and through a metal door to the east was the reception and waiting area. The place was dusty and sounds were muffled, like cloth pressed over the ears. The interior had a distinct look of decay - paint was peeling from the walls, all the light bulbs were broken, the carpet was pulling up at the corners.

The mold around the windows doesn't have the usual spotty pattern I associate with mold. It grows in groups, usually in corners, in a big black mass, then spreads out in long, slender lines made up of tiny colonies. I'm not even sure it *is* mold. At times it looks like it. At other times it looks like some kind of plant life. It smells like mold, though. I avoided all physical contact.

The walls and ceilings of the building weren't moldy, just the windows. I picked my way through the office area towards the holding cells. It looked eerily as though people had up and left in the middle of a work day. Photos and personal effects still sat on desks. Papers and files littered the ground, but were also stacked high on desks in In and Out trays. Rotting jackets were draped over rotting chairs.

Most of the doors were locked. The cells were locked, too, and empty. I was a bit disappointed by the building so far.

I found out why the front window was shattered when I went into the lobby. Bullet holes peppered the plaster on either side of it, and bullet casings littered the floor. A smear of what looked like dried brown blood painted the wall under the window. What had happened here? There were no bodies. Maybe it was an old crime scene, which was actually pretty cool. I tried taking pictures, but like I said, they didn't turn out. They just looked black, or really blurry sepia tones.

Something moved to my left. I couldn't see it, but I heard the shifting of papers and something sliding across the carpet. I froze, pointed my light in its direction, and yelled, "Anyone in here?" No response. Heart rate quickening, I asked again and was again met with only rustling.

The noises came from behind the tall reception desk. I got up on my tiptoes and shone my light behind it. The noises stopped. I saw nothing - just a swivel chair and a knocked over phone. I couldn't see under the desk, and the door to the right that led into the reception area was locked.

At this point I assumed an animal was in there, maybe a raccoon. Raccoons freak me out. They're vicious little shits, don't let their adorable faces fool you. In any case, I decided to leave well enough alone and check out the basement.

I've mentioned several times that this town made me feel watched. Upon stepping down those creaky wooden stairs and letting the door swing shut behind me, the feeling intensified tenfold. I figured at the time that it was because it was pitch black, and I only had my flashlight to see by.

The decay down there was particularly bad. The entire ceiling was covered in black, as well as the ventilation ducts. The mold oozed halfway down the wall, which dripped brackish water.

Along one wall hung three headless human figures, brown and rotting. They made me jump violently when my light landed on them, but a second look told me that they were actually old hazmat suits that seemed to be covered in filth. The helmets lay at their feet.

Someone had set up a makeshift lab down here, between filing cabinets and cardboard boxes. The rotting counters on the opposite wall held a microscope, a bunch of dirty test tubes and glassware, and a 2013 Mac desktop, which looked just as moldy as the rest of the place. That gave me pause. I'd never seen this level of decay in such a modern building. The computer looked like it had been there for thirty years, not one.

A pile of papers sat next to the microscope, mildewed and barely legible but dense with type. I remember a few phrases from when I glanced at it, like "signs of accelerated growth" and "stage one symptoms" that caught my attention. I was about to start flipping through the file, but before I could even touch it the door at the top of the stairs behind me slammed open. I yelped, and spun around.

"*GET UP HERE!*" someone screamed from upstairs.

It was a male voice, ragged and breaking. Though the tone was aggressive, he didn't sound angry so much as panicked. It set my heart thudding. The beam of my flashlight didn't reach the top of the stairs, so I couldn't see who was calling to me.

No one was at the top of the stairs when I got closer. Eager by now to get out of the building, I took them two at a time. The main floor hallway was empty, too, which both relieved and perplexed me. Where had the man gone?

Didn't matter. I decided to try to escape any form of trouble and made my way quickly towards the maintenance door I'd entered the building by. It had shut behind me, I noticed immediately, which meant someone else was definitely in the building.

I raced towards it, though nothing was chasing me, almost expecting it to be locked. But it opened quite easily, and I spilled out into the sunlight. I tripped over the heavy rock I'd used to prop the door open, which had been purposely moved, picked myself up and found sanctuary in my car.

I probably should have left town then. The experience with the screaming man had set me on edge, and I hadn't really enjoyed exploring the police station. Even seeing the old crime scene in the lobby had failed to really pique my enthusiasm, prodding instead at my underlying fears. But what happened there? Was the bloodstain connected to the lab in the basement? I wasn't done looking around town.

I'll save the exploration of the apartment building for next time. It was the creepiest place I've ever been in terms of atmosphere. It deserves its own update.

Thanks again for all your help, Nosleep!

Part 3

There are a lot of pressing things going on right now, and most of them seem connected to Nosleep and the Infected Town. It makes it hard to just write about what I did last week, since I'm dying to share these new experiences and possible clues with you. But I've decided you need the story in chronological order, at the very least to avoid confusion. And maybe revisiting these events on paper will help clear things up for me.

So instead of telling you what's happening here in California (no worries, there are still no signs of moldiness, just increasing amounts of weirdness), let's go back a week, before I'd ever heard of Jess, Liz or Alan.

After leaving the police station, I still had the whole day left and really wanted to feel like exploring this town was worthwhile. I decided to check out the apartment building.

Hillside Apartments is a four story building on the south end of town, not far from the bridge. It's a very normal-looking brick building from the outside, probably built sometime in the eighties, no signs of structural decay. The only strange thing, as you're walking up to the front doors, is that all the windows on the face of the building are covered in black from the inside. As with the town sign, I thought at first that it was black spray paint or something of the like. As you might have guessed, though, it's mold.

The front doors were locked. There was a keypad and callbox, but neither seemed to have power running to them. I made my way around to the parking lot of the building, past a row of dusty cars, and up a wheelchair ramp towards the back door. It was stuck or something. The handle turned and there was no sign of a deadlock, but no amount of pushing on my part would make it open. I half-heartedly gave the crowbar a few tries, but soon gave up.

The ground floor windows around front were low enough to slide through easily. Luckily for me, the third window I attempted was unlocked and slid open, only sticking once or twice. I plopped my backpack through, then followed head first. I had to push my way through the rotting Venetian blinds.

I found myself in an apartment bedroom. After turning on my flashlight, I let the beam wander around for only a moment before reaching back into my back for the respirator again.

This place looked worse than the police station basement. Black mold covered the floors, walls and ceilings. Water gathered in one corner of the ceiling as under a busted pipe, letting gray droplets escape to join the pool of water on the decaying mattress underneath. Furniture had been reduced to vague shapes, stained and rotten, in tones of gray and black.

I left the bedroom and walked into a living area that could have been inhabited yesterday, if not for the mold. Again, the place didn't just look deserted, it looked like it had been *evacuated*. A few bottles and cans littered the coffee table in the living room, near an entertainment cabinet with an expensive looking (yet seemingly decaying) sound system and TV. A couple plates sat on the counter in the kitchen, covered in black gunk, along with a sink full of dishes growing green algae. But the creepiest things were the family photos lining the walls - mom, dad, two infants - grinning at me from silver frames. All left there hanging, mold beginning to creep over their happy, normal faces. Anyone moving out would take those, surely. I could explain away the dishes and even the electronics, but family pictures? People run back into fires for family pictures.

I left the apartment, unnerved, and turned back to see which number it was. Only there were no numbers on the door. I shone my light down the hall to either side. No numbers on any doors. Why?

The more I discovered in this town, the weirder it seemed to get. I decided to do a thorough sweep of the apartment building and see if I could enter every room. It would take a while, but I wanted answers. Maybe I'd even go back to the police station once I'd given the man time to leave.

I find, when exploring, that a systematic approach works best for me. I usually choose a corner in the highest or lowest accessible area of the building and spread out from there. This ensures that, if the building proves interesting and you want to make sure you've seen all of it, that you don't end up confusing yourself and skipping or backtracking.

This building wasn't all that big, so I wasn't worried about getting lost. What did concern me was the idea of someone else being in the building with me. I couldn't shake the feeling.

Hillside Apartments is much darker inside than it has any right to be. Darkness breeds everywhere, so deep that the corners look like a void. At one point I turned off my flashlight, on the ground floor mind you, and discovered I couldn't see my hand if I moved it more than five inches from my face. It was an unnatural darkness for 11 am on a Saturday, even inside. Glass crunched under my boots as I made my way down the hall, and I looked up to see that every fixture was missing a bulb and had been grown over with mold. The windows all hosted their own colonies, too, eliminating all light from the sun.

My goal was the stairs, but I tried every apartment on the way there. More than a few were locked, but the doors I could open showed me much the same scene as that first apartment. Stained, moldy couches, cushions flattened with use. Full trash bins and half-loaded dishwashers. Broken desktop computers and TVs. Personal effects left behind and slowly being taken over by mold - pictures, books, clothes, magazines, jewelry boxes.

While personal effects remained, every identifying detail or number seemed elusive. Rot covered the date on a newspaper I found. Mail left in piles on a bookshelf had been so waterlogged that the names and addresses were illegible. It became a kind of game for me to try to find one piece of evidence as to when the town had last been functioning and who had lived here. Even a year would have made me jump for joy. I still want to confirm this. If I find that the town had been inhabited in 2012 or 2013, there's more evidence that it's the place where Alan and Liz lived.

At one point I came into the lobby, which is large enough that the beam of my flashlight didn't reach the opposite wall, swallowed instead into darkness. I didn't linger here for long. I hated feeling like I was in such a vast place, like the mouth of a pitch black cave. Quickly, I found a door marked "Stairway" and went inside.

Whereas the lobby brought out my agoraphobia, this space seemed uncomfortably cramped. I felt I was being encroached on from all sides by the grimy walls as I made my way down the concrete steps, so much so that I kept swinging my light left and right to make sure the passage wasn't getting narrower. Raspy breathing filled the space, and I'm not sure it was my just own.

Immediately upon leaving the stairway, my light found shelves filled with rusty machinery and a ceiling of blackened pipes. Custodial and maintenance tools littered the floor. The hallway ahead gave me the creeps - like the lobby, my light was swallowed by blackness before it ended - so I turned right and went down a shorter corridor to an open door.

At first glance, things looked typical for the building - decay reigned, but everything was recognizable. A hulking mass of rusted machinery took up half the room, and pipes and ventilation shafts crisscrossed the moldy ceiling. In one corner of the wall was a set of iron ladder rungs leading up to a trapdoor in the ceiling.

When I shone my flashlight towards the boilers and their pipes, something struck me as odd. It looked like something was behind the machinery. I came closer, peering between pipes and around twisted hunks of metal, but couldn't get a good look. There was definitely something back there. Finally I squeezed myself between a boiler and a wall, changed my flashlight to the other hand, and got a good look at my discovery.

It was laying on a pile of mold, as though the fungus had gathered around in a mound as a makeshift bed. Can mold pile up so high?

I'm not sure what it was, but I have an idea after reading Jessica's story. It was tiny, smaller than most humans. It lay in the fetal position, all curled in on itself, except for its shrivelled white legs, which hung at an unnatural angle from its hips. There were no toes or anything recognizable as feet, from what I could see, and no hands besides two fused masses of flesh the end of its arms.

I could see its ribs through its flesh on the torso, but all other details you associate with a human being were gone - no belly button, no nipples, no hair. It was too pale to be flesh toned, with a hint of gray like a decaying corpse. The head was bald and withered. Its face was turned towards me. At least, I thought it was. There were no eyes, no nose… just a smooth expanse of pallid flesh over the largest mouth I'd ever seen. The creature was smiling, broadly, from ear to ear and chin to cheekbones. Its teeth were human shaped but far longer, and seemed fused together. There was no gap between teeth of the upper jaw and teeth of the lower.

I freaked out. While trying to squirm out of the space between boiler and wall, I noticed something about the creature. No movement, no breathing. Not even a twitch or any kind of reaction to my presence. I realized, after a minute, that it was dead.

That was enough for me. I couldn't stand to be in the building another minute. I raced up the stairs and, avoiding the lobby, went back to the window I entered through. I fell through so quickly that I knocked the wind out of myself when I landed. As I had upon leaving the police station, I found sanctuary in my car. Except this time, I drove straight out of town.

I rationalized these events back at the motel, between a hot shower and a cold beer. Maybe it had been a doll of some kind, or a mannequin, or even a petrified animal. I think at one point I decided it was a fucked up student art project. But now I think I saw the same creature Jess had seen in the basement of the building seven months ago - only this time it wasn't moving around.

So the next day I continued into San Francisco, glad to be putting distance between myself and the ghost town. But that doesn't mean things are over. I'm not done trying to figure things out, I'm just not brave enough to do any more solo exploring. Whatever I decide to do, I'll keep you updated.

Part 4

Sorry about the delay in updates. Things are kind of blowing up here in San Fran (I guess locals hate it when you call it that? Ha). My laptop broke two days after I last posted - not sure if it was a horrible virus or a hardware issue, but my mouse moves around on its own onscreen and I have no control over it. The movements look mostly haphazard, but it keeps opening Chrome and my Word documents, including this account along with my other urban exploration journal entries. It opens a bunch of picture files, too, but without control over the mouse I can't tell which ones. I don't think it has anything to do with the Infected Town, but it is super annoying and preventing me from posting here. As of now, I'm oscillating between typing this out on my phone and using Blake's (my friend's) computer. I sent my laptop to a computer guy, so hopefully it will be fixed soon. Honestly, I have other things on my mind. But I'm alive and totally fine - still no signs of mold in California. Since I work online from home anyway, I've extended my trip here by quite a bit. Blake has to get the days off from work so he can come with me, and now we're apparently taking his girlfriend along too.

I have to admit, when I first read the posts by Jessica, Liz and Alan I thought a few kids had been inspired by the Infected Town and written an elaborate scary story about it. The mold, the buildings, the body in the basement - all could be explained by separate natural events if you firmly refused to believe in the paranormal. I didn't actually think the town was infected so much as unlucky. Still not sure where I stand on the whole paranormal issue. I might have to literally get slapped in the face by a monster before completely accepting it.

But since posting these accounts and getting attention for them, I've gotten several strange messages and emails (not sure how they - you? - found my email address) from three different sources, as far as I can tell.

So, as for future plans, I'm still planning to go back, this time with reinforcements, and we're going to figure out what's happening there. It's going to be me, Blake, and his girl Heather, who we met at a bar a couple nights after I got into town. They clicked immediately, so now we have a new team member. They've both been prepped on what's going on, and both of them are aware of the risks and still willing to join me.

I haven't slept well since leaving Oregon. I have nightmares nearly every night, the kind where something's chasing you but you can't see it, and you can't quite get the muscles in your legs to move. I've mostly fixed the problem with melatonin tablets and Vodka (having no dreams at all is superior to having nightmares) but I'm hoping that exposure to mold spores hasn't permanently altered my neurons or something (she says, as though she has any idea what she's talking about).

Okay, the update. First off, a couple nights after arriving in California, I got a PM on Reddit from /u/helpmenosleep. If you don't remember, that was Jess's username when she first posted her story. Since the story's end, helpmenosleep and /u/alanpwtf have been posting weird messages in comment sections, usually gibberish or nursery rhymes. I've gone through the comment history, and was creeped out when I realized a lot of the comments almost sounded playful, or like they were trying to be. Only a few get aggressive, but when they do, they get *really* aggressive. Also, helpmenosleep has a pattern of bizarre misspellings with no rhyme or reason to them. I don't get it. Here is the PM I got, in case you can make any more sense of it.

Subject: my dear Claire

From: helpmenosleep >> sent two weeks ago

Vrrse I

```
O'er the midnight moorlands crying,
Thro' the cypress forests sighing,
In the night-wind madly flying,
     Hellish forms with streaming hair;
In the barren branches creaking,
By the stagnant swamp-pools speaking,
Past the shore-cliffs ever shrieking;
     Damn'd daemons of despair.
```

II:2 II:6 II:15 II:31 V:11, V:35 for V:8 V:22 V:21 V:36 V:37

I:12 III:23 V:34 III:15 V:15, III:12, III:37 DO NXT TRUST HIM

reaxd the rest..> tp FIGHT perpetuates DESPAIRr.

… Yeah. So there's that. Seems our moldy friend is a poet. I am so not English-Lit Girl. The streaming hair bit immediately made me think of the lady under the bridge, and the forest imagery made me think of the woods around the town - except that there are no swamps or moors nearby, to my knowledge. And what's with the letters and numbers underneath the verse? Some kind of code? I've tried to match them up as lines:words in the verse but the result is gibberish (I thought II:2 would mean line 2, word 2… only it doesn't). Also, obviously none of the lines have 35 words. Must be something else. Or nothing at all. Who is to fucking say? It's clear helpmenosleep is insane.

I don't know how helpmenosleep knows my name, since I'm pretty sure I haven't told anyone here. But now the secret's out. Name's Claire, nice to meet you.

I hesitate to call helpmenosleep "Jess," or say that whoever may be posting as /u/alanpwtf is Alan or Liz. I think who/whatever is behind the mold has the password to all of their accounts and a working knowledge of phones and computers (even if they suck at typing). I think the comments are just meant to tease or fuck with us. Helpmenosleep in particular seems to want to pique my curiosity and make me return to the town. I'll rise to that challenge.

The next item of interest was something I found on the passenger's seat in my car shortly after I'd left town the second time. I'd left my windows cracked, so someone could easily have slipped it inside when I was exploring the apartment. I forgot about it when I posted the previous update, but I recently found it again, where I'd shoved it to the bottom of my backpack. It's just a note. I took this picture of it at the motel, but it's transcribed here.

GET OUT OF THIS TOWN.

I don't know who you are or why you're here, but get out. I'm not afraid to take drastic measures if I see you here again. Final warning, little girl. Someday you'll thank me.

-- a friend

Uh huh. I'm getting sick of vague warnings. On the back of the folded note was drawn a house, with CAUTION: DO NOT ENTER next to it. No idea what that's supposed to symbolize, but I'm adding the note to the "evidence" file.

I know a lot of you will say it's Z or his organization. I don't think so. Here's why:

I received this email three days ago.

To: [My email address]

From: Unknown (yeah, that's all it said - "Unknown." I didn't know you could make your email address private like this. They apparently don't want their address out, and they definitely don't want me to reply.)

Subject: Infected Town

I'm going to say this once, and only once. Leave that town alone. No good can come of it.

We will not be there for you. We will not answer your questions or try to help. Z is dead. R is dead. Everyone who knew anything is dead. We are giving up the fight. We never had the resources for anything besides a temporary fix, anyway. I'm sorry we lied. I'm sorry we pretended we were stronger. We are not.

It wins.

You can help by posting this online so it knows it cannot find us. It has no cause to. We know when we've been beaten. JUST LEAVE US ALONE.

I keep saying "we," but it's just me now.

Good luck, Claire. Please be smart. Do what it doesn't want you to: just forget about it. That's the only way.

I will not be in touch. I have heard it whispering to me. Its only a matter of time now. I still have my motor functions. I still have Z's gun and one bullet. I can stop my torment. I can prevent yours..

Good bye.

Was I sent a suicide note? The email left a horrible taste in my mouth and a sinking in my stomach. Poor whoever-it-was. I wish I could help them.

But I refuse to believe that whoever is behind all this “wins.” My resolve is firm, so don’t try to talk me out of this. We will find answers, and we will fix this. It can’t just be ignored and allowed to cause pain!

So now you’re up to speed. A couple messages, a few nightmares, but no mold here in California. I’ll update you if anything happens in the meantime, but next time I post it will hopefully be to tell you about my return to Infected Town.

Part 5

Yet again, I'm posting this while most of the people in America are asleep. Ha, classic Claire...

We are officially here in Oregon, just outside of Infected Town, in the little motel. I know, it took a bit longer than I expected to be able to leave San Francisco. Blake had a hard time getting days off work and I loved exploring the city.

I started getting restless a couple days ago, though. I really wanted to get back to the town. I had dreams about it, like it was calling me. In the dreams the sun shone brightly and everyone was smiling - and not in a forced, monstrous way. There was laughter and the people felt like family. You know how, in dreams, if you meet your brother or parents, they might not physically look like them, but you *know* they're your family? Like that. It felt lovely in the moment, but when I'd wake up I'd feel sick, unnerved. Lied to. The town is no good, so why is my subconscious trying to make it seem positive?

Anyway, I started pressuring Blake to get going, backed up by Heather, who is interested to see whether or not I'm making shit up. I thought about just driving back there by myself, but I'm also not an idiot. Finally, Blake got some days off, and we set off when schedules allowed.

People keep asking for the town name, or coordinates, or some details as to where it is. I really don't feel comfortable telling you. I apologize for that. For one thing, I'm currently here and I don't love the idea of a bunch of strangers knowing my exact location (however friendly and awesome you seem over the internet). For another, I don't like the idea of endangering people who try to visit the town. I regret even bringing Blake and Heather into this, even though I told them about it before I knew how serious it is. And, to be brutally honest, part of me wants to be the only one with access. At least until I get some answers. I feel like a shithead for it, but that's the truth. Sorry, really I am.

We didn't get to the town until after it was dark, and everyone was tired from the long drive. Heather wanted to just stop at the hotel, but I was eager to do some exploring. Blake, voice of reason, said it was too fucking dark, don't be reckless Claire. We compromised by taking a drive into town, with the understanding that we wouldn't get out of the car.

"Shit…" Blake said, as soon as we crossed the bridge, leaning forward to get a look at our surroundings."You weren't fuckin' kidding about that watched feeling."

It was true. Prickling up the back of my neck. Eyes from all directions. I glanced at Heather in the backseat. She'd gone completely stiff and pressed herself right up against the window, eyes darting in all directions.

I pointed out the apartment building to them as we drove past it, hoping Blake would want to stop and check it out. He didn't. I looked up to that third floor window, the one on the right that had been filled in on that little note. It didn't look any different from the others. I slowed the car to a crawl, craning my head to look at the building.

A movement in a window on the fourth floor caught my attention, but it might have been my imagination. I squinted. Was someone standing by that window? It was hard to tell in the distance and the dark, but for a moment I thought I saw a shadow move behind the moldy glass…

Suddenly Blake yelled and grabbed the wheel from me, yanking it hard to the right. Heather and I screamed as we were jerked by the car's movement. We were only going maybe 15 mph but I slammed on the brakes, my heart pounding.

"What?! *What*?!"

Blake laughed in relief, slumping back into his seat, passing a hand over his face. "A cat," he said, still laughing. "A fucking cat just shot across the road." He rubbed his eyes.

Heather smacked the back of his head and admonished him on pulling the wheel from the driver. I punched his shoulder gently. He argued that without his excellent reflexes we would have hit the kitty. I was very glad we hadn't. Heather, half-joking, asked if the cat looked moldy or weird-looking. Blake said no, he was pretty sure it was just a regular cat. I assume it's feral, since we haven't seen any people whatsoever. We got to laughing nervously as we continued our drive.

I think I mentioned this in one of my previous updates, but many houses that we passed had their doors hanging wide open - gaping holes into dark interiors. It was a chilling image, the mockery of a safe, welcoming community. "Come in," the houses seemed to say.

I could feel Blake getting antsy beside me, his fingers twitching. He has the explorer's bug, too, and these residences were so easy. You could just stroll right inside and pick through the remains of people's lives. Didn't even have to force a door or climb in a window. Easy. And curiosity was killing me.

I turned on a side street I hadn't driven down before, looking for lights or signs of human presence. Nada. In one side yard a laundry line stretched between the house and the fence. Clothing still hung on it, ragged and weathered by the elements. Dusty cars were parked in dusty

driveways - one had the hood up, a collection of tools scattered on the ground. Kid's bikes lay on lawns. All the grass was either dead or knee height.

"It's so weird," Heather said. "Like everyone just up and left at once."

"Maybe the town was evacuated," Blake said, then affected his voice into something vaguely North Eastern. "'Coal fire still burning underground, you know? Breath enough of those fumes, oh, bound to kill ya.'" I laughed. He'd quoted one of the horror movies (and games) that had bonded us when we first met. I love that shit, but I doubt mining fires or Red Pyramid Things have anything to do with this place (luckily).

"We should leave," Heather said shakily. Scaredy-cat. Sighing, I agreed and took a right turn, then another right to go back the way I'd come. Upon rounding the corner, however, I slammed on the brakes again.

Two people were shuffling down the sidewalk away from us. Out for a stroll, maybe... at eleven at night. One of them had a sweatshirt on over a dirty dress, the hood pulled up over her head (I assume it was a woman). She was barefoot with pale skinny legs. The other person was a tall, dark haired man in a leather jacket. He had his arm around the girl's shoulders, huddling her close. They moved very slowly.

It didn't take them long to notice us. The man turned when my headlights hit his back, saw our car, and pulled the girl quickly with him, heading towards the shadows between the houses and trees. I didn't see much of his face, and none of hers, shadowed by the hood.

She limped along, jerkily, almost as if her limbs weren't cooperating or her legs were numb, but she clearly wasn't moving fast enough for him. Just before reaching the treeline he scooped her into his arms bridal style and ran away. He was a spry one.

I drove around the block, trying to intercept them, but they didn't come out again. Blake firmly refused to go look for them on foot in the dark, and I knew he was right. We don't have weapons. They might. Heather demanded we get out of the town for the night.

I headed back towards the bridge, mind buzzing. Who is living here? Are they transients or someone we know - Jess, Liz, Alan?

I saw enough of the place on this drive through to quell any suspicions that this town is still functional. It's not. It has all the trappings of abandonment, except it isn't old and *there are still people here*. I've heard of people staying in evacuated towns, out of desperation or pride or a combination of both. I find the concept unnerving.

Nothing of note happened on the way back to the motel, except this: I opened my window shortly before crossing the bridge. I was confident that we were home free and I really wanted a smoke. It took me a moment to notice anything was off, but Blake sensed it almost as soon as I did. He rolled down his window, too, leaning his head out.

Yes, the air smelled like mold. We knew that before. But what I hadn't noticed on my previous visit was how *quiet* this place was. I stopped the car on the bridge and we listened. No insects chirping, no window blowing, no rustling of the countless trees around us or gush of water from below. For a moment I felt like I was sitting in a vacuum.

Then Blake put his hand on my hand, glanced back to Heather, and whispered "*Go*," with an intense look in his eye. I accelerated.

When we got back to the motel and got settled, Blake and I met for a cigarette in the parking lot. Heather was taking a shower in her and Blake's room, which he said was a good thing.

"I didn't want to scare her," he said. "She's really freaked out by this whole thing. She's not sure she wants to go back."

"Well, *we* are, right?" I asked. He smiled.

"Of course, Claire-tron. I'm as interested as you. But I don't think you should tell her what I'm about to tell you. And I don't want you flipping your shit, either."

"Well I *am* one to flip my shit." This was an example of "sarcasm."

"Yeah, okay," he said. Then he got all Blake-nervous, rubbing the back of his neck and looking everywhere, with kind of an angry or intense expression. I demanded to know what was up, what had him so jumpy.

"Okay," he said. "So when we were stopped on the bridge, listening? I looked at the railing. You know, of the bridge. And there was something, like, *on* it."

"What something?"

"It had to be some kind of plant or something. Some kind of moss. But it freaked me out because what it *looked* like… was a hand. White hand, really boney, holding on to the railing. Like someone was hanging off the side of the bridge."

That gave me chills. We hadn't seen anything dangling from the bridge on approach, but we hadn't been looking and the angle might have prevented it anyway. I told him I was freaked out to even go to my own room, and he shrugged.

"I think we've been reading those fucking stories to much. They got in my head. It was probably just a tree branch."

"A hand shaped tree branch."

"Crazier things, right?"

All the same, he stayed up with me when Heather fell asleep and we wrote this. So that's where we are. Mold. An abandoned town that's not quite abandoned. People dangling off bridges. It just keeps getting weirder.

We'll keep you posted.

Part 6

I woke up on the morning of the 17th to some texts from a number I didn't recognize with an Oregon area code. They came around 3:30 in the morning. I screenshot them for you.

I noticed, like you probably did, that the only capital letters spell out "I AM HE." This guy really likes his little riddles. It pissed me off, but it also scared me. The unknown number could very well belong to someone in the Infected Town. But if it's /u/helpmenosleep or /u/alanpwtf, why are there no random misspellings or jumbled letters? Other than the sporadic capitalization, they seem pretty lucid.

I also got a text from a different number, one with a Chicago area code. I know Alan went to Chicago, but he never lived there. So it's probably not his phone. The delivery time on that was 6:27 AM, around three hours before I woke up. Here's that.

I rushed into Blake and Heather's room and showed them. Neither had received messages of any kind.

On the way into town we parked on the bridge to check out Blake's sighting of that hand. I noticed the silence again as soon as I stepped out of the car, like the bridge marked the edge of a bubble where the atmosphere completely shifted. Heather played ignorant, but I think she guessed we weren't telling her something. She doesn't read these accounts. She says they freak her out.

There was nothing on the railings of the bridge or anything hanging off - no tree branches or monsters. I jumped down beneath the bridge, followed by Blake, and found a dry creek. No one was there, but along the banks was an obvious camp of some kind - blankets and sleeping bags, a collapsed tent, and an empty fire pit. Someone had been here recently, evidenced by a few embers still glowing under the ashes. I wondered if it was the guy in the leather jacket and the girl.

I wanted to go to the high school first, since that's what the Chicago number said I should do. Heather did not. She kept saying how it was a trap, we'd be ambushed. She was adamant. I decided to heed her advice. I planned on visiting it the next day anyway; hopefully Heather would decide to stay back at the motel. To you she probably sounds like the voice of reason, but I wasn't thinking like that. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

We went to the apartment building again instead, since I hadn't explored it thoroughly last time. We jumped in through the window I'd opened after we'd put on respirators and I'd pulled my hair back (Heather and Blake both have short hair).

It was the same as before - oppressive, dark, horrible. Blake wanted to check out the basement first thing to see the creature's body. I was feeling brave (read: stupid) with him by my side (he's always had that effect on me) so I agreed. Heather was looking uneasy, staying away from walls and hugging herself. She seemed sure we were about to be attacked. But when nothing happened as we passed through the lobby she started to relax, and as we whispered to each other it started to feel more like a regular exploration. Knowing what I know now, I couldn't believe I'd gone in there alone last time.

The floors creaked and moaned above us as we moved towards the basement, probably just settling. I thought warily that those people we'd seen the night before could be in the building. The stairwell is probably my least favorite part of that building.

I pointed out the boilers once we were in that room, saying I'd seen the body behind them. I didn't want to look again - once was enough - but Blake eagerly squeezed himself into the space between the wall and the boilers and shone his flashlight back there.

"Where is it?" he asked after a moment.

"Like, right there," I said, confused as to how he was missing it. It was pretty conspicuous. "On top of the black pile of whatever."

Blake slid back out of the space, shaking his head. "There's nothing back there."

I ran to check. Sure enough, there was no body. The black pile seemed a bit bigger, but other than that the area was empty. Maybe it hadn't been dead. It sure looked dead, though - dead and mummified. I snapped a few pictures.

Come to it, we took a lot of pictures down there. These three were the only ones that showed anything more than blurry darkness. In the first two you can see the boilers to your right. It was taken from the door to the room. The last is one of about 25 that I snapped of that black pile. It was the only one that came out. Keep in mind this camera was set to normal settings with the flash on.

Next we headed back upstairs to the third floor, at my request. It was a long climb in that dark, claustrophobic stairwell. The third floor hallway was as decayed as the rest of the building. Most of the mold was on the ceilings and slowly spreading down the walls. Our feet crunched on broken glass and litter.

There were quite a few open doors up here, none of them numbered. Blake pointed his light into a room with an old model train set, which immediately attracted his attention. Heather followed him, but I followed my own clue. I went down to the end of the hallway and found the

apartment that had been shaded in that note left in my car the first day I visited. The door was closed but unlocked. I went inside.

Whereas in the hallway outside the mold was sporadic along the walls, here the walls were all gray or black. I walked down the short entryway to the living room. Moisture dripped from the corners. The venetian blinds on the window were rotting off their hangers. A flatscreen TV rested against one wall. A gray, decaying couch sat opposite it. A small laptop perched on one of the arms, seemingly untouched by the decay. I withdrew my spare sweatshirt from my pack, wrapped the computer in it and decided to take it with me.

I checked out the bedroom mentioned in Jessica's posts. Sure enough, the bed was flipped onto its side against the wall, a large black concave shape carved into the underside of the mattress. The vent she spoke of was smaller than I'd imagined, only about five inches tall by nine wide. Mold snaked from it, dense around the dark opening.

I went back out to the living room and looked for anything else of interest, but didn't find much. I was about to head back to the door when a sound caught my attention.

Thump, slide… thump, slide… Like a fucking campfire story. It was getting louder and louder. I called for Blake and set about trying to find its source. Thump, slide… thump, sliiiiide… For the life of me I couldn't see where it was coming from. I checked every room, but it was loudest in the living room.

I called for Blake again. No reply. Suddenly there was a *SLAM*. I raced back to the front door to find it had been *thrown shut behind me*. Panic mounting, I scrambled to open it. Locked. I was trapped in this room!

Before I could get my shaking hands to work the deadbolt, there was the loud sound of something banging against metal. I spun around just in time to see a vent cover high up on the wall behind me get torn from its screws and drop to the ground.

An arm snaked out of the hole in the wall, white as candlewax, emaciated. Long, twisted fingers clawed at the air. Another arm came through, the hand groping for the wall underneath the hole. The other hand found the wall above and pushed. When the head appeared, I snapped out of shock enough to scream.

It was not the face I'd seen on the mold pile, but it was similar. White and gaunt with a stretched, too-large smile. It had eyes, though they were closed, the lids seemingly fused together. It had hair, too, just a few short strands atop its skull. The head was tilted at an extreme angle to the left so it could fit into the tiny space. But as soon as it cleared the edge of the vent it jerked to the side and drooped to "look" at me upside down. Its neck must have been twisted 180 degrees. I screamed again. That horrible smile...

I took my eyes off the creature moving towards me and clawed at the door handle. Blake was on the other side, shouting furiously, banging at the wood. Heather was sobbing. The deadbolt stuck as I tried to turn it and I cried out, stealing a glance back at my pursuer. It had cleared its shoulders and most of its bony chest, slowly slipping down the wall. Its arms reached towards the ground. It was still smiling right at me.

I pushed against the deadbolt and was finally graced with the sound of a solid click. Crying, I threw the door open and rushed into Blake's arms. He immediately saw the creature and let out a panicked "What the *fuck*?!" Heather screamed.

He pulled me away from it. It had touched the ground, its legs sliding out of the vent behind it, twisted and impossibly thin. It reached towards us. Then Blake slammed the door on it.

Our escape is a blur until we were in the car, speeding towards the bridge. I found it hard to breathe and Blake was driving, one hand rubbing my shoulder. Heather was huddled in the back, trembling violently. The laptop I'd stolen rested on my lap, still wrapped in my sweater.

We made it back to the motel and each took long showers, putting the clothes we'd worn into a garbage bag to wash. We didn't touch anything unless we wore gloves, but I don't know if that's even enough anymore. It might already be too late. I can't say I wasn't warned.

Blake took a bunch of pictures on the third floor. However, predictably, only one showed anything. Here it is, a closeup of the mold on one of the walls in an apartment. Pretty disappointing, but it's what we have.

I'm writing these and getting them up as fast as I can, but I'm finding it hard to focus. The exploring has left me tired, and now I can't sleep, but for a few hours a night. I've traded unnerving dreams for no dreams at all. A lot of you will say it's because I'm infected, and at this point I'm getting pretty scared that that might be the case. I can't sleep, and when I do I see that face. I don't think it's safe for me to leave.

I'll save the rest for next time. For the first time, I'm really regretting this ever started.

Part 7

I've been losing time. This is my third attempt at typing this out. I'll sit down at the desk to start writing, and suddenly it's three hours later and I'm on the porch finishing a pack of cigarettes. When I go back to the computer, a blank Word document is staring at me.

But it's not only when I'm trying to write. The first blackout I can remember happened shortly after we came back from our drive through the town. Since then, they come at least two or three times a day. I'll walk into a new room and suddenly realize I can't remember what I've been doing for the past half hour. I'll complain of being hungry and suddenly we're sitting in front of the TV eating pizza. I'll be in the shower and suddenly I'm in bed with the lights out.

Blake and Heather don't feel odd, and they say I act totally normal during the times I can't remember. Blake won't let me quarantine myself in my room, as I know I should. He also stubbornly refuses to take Heather and get back to San Francisco. He says there's a good chance they're already infected, too, and he won't risk spreading it. He also won't leave me. I know it's selfish, but I'm grateful. He and Heather keep arguing about it. She stormed out a couple minutes ago to take a walk, because he won't give an inch. Too bad she didn't drive herself - she hadn't wanted to pay for gas.

I promised myself I'd take you through this chronologically, though. The memory loss makes it impossible to promise I won't leave anything out.

We didn't go into town the next day. I was (am) still traumatized after seeing that creature and I wasn't sure I ever wanted to go back. But I also didn't want to leave yet. The laptop from Hillside Apartments was wrapped in a plastic bag and ignored on the counter. I drank most of the day away. Heather and Blake argued on and off about leaving ("Please, babe, let's just go. Leave her here. It's not even our problem.") But Blake is my best friend. He was mine before she ever came along. He'd never leave me, and he let her know it. He's also as curious as I am as to what's going on.

Around three in the afternoon that day I got a text from the Oregon number. It said "HEllo beautiful. so Happy youv3 decided to stay. i'm tHrowing a littl3 party in your Honor. wE can't wait. see you soon!"

I deleted it shortly after writing it down. "He" again. Who is "He"?

The morning of the 19th I woke up feeling braver after about three hours of sleep. I kept thinking of that text from the Chicago number about the high school and the promise of answers. I had to go back. I'm pretty sure I'm infected, and if that's the case then leaving is not an option. My only chance is to figure out what's going on. Maybe I can stop this somehow, even if it means burning the town to the ground. Maybe there *is* a cure, or a source, or *something*.

Heather didn't come with Blake and I when we headed into town that day. She's scared and furious with me for getting them into this. I don't blame her. I feel really guilty about it. They knew everything I knew when they agreed to come, but I was the one who'd unearthed something that should have remained buried.

We'd seen the high school on our drive that first night, and it wasn't hard to find again. It's a tall gray building with red double doors, the sidewalk lined with trees, very picturesque. The sign out front said Charles M. Hadwell High School.

I'd thought the apartment building had been tough to get into. This one was locked up tighter than a drum, a stark contrast to the houses on the very same block with their doors wide open. The front entrance was heavily chained and padlocked - we decided the crowbar would be a last-ditch effort here. The chain was so tight around the handles we doubted we'd be able to get the leverage to break it in any case. First we circled the perimeter and found three more doors, all metal, locked tight. All the moldy windows on the first story had bars over them.

There was, however, a fire escape, and the windows on the upper floors weren't barred. Conveniently enough, the ladder was already lowered to the ground, ready to use. We climbed through an unlocked window on the third floor. Again, we were wearing respirators, gloves, long sleeves and beanies. Though I doubt it mattered anymore.

The room we fell into was dim and old fashioned. The building had probably been built in the sixties and had not been updated since. The walls were dark green, trimmed with wood, and the floor was beige tile. Mold populated every corner; the level of decay was comparable to the police station.

We moved into the hallway. Some of the lockers along the walls were open, contents spilling from them. Papers and books and binders. We passed classroom after classroom, slowly realizing we had no idea what we were looking for. The school was full of documents and many of the chalkboards or projectors had writing on them. The school was a big place and we didn't know where these alleged "answers" would be. It could take days to look through everything, but we started out searching pretty thoroughly.

In the fourth room we entered, I noticed a classic chalk board in one corner with some kind of chart drawn on it. I checked it out while

Blake started rummaging around the teacher's desk by the wall. There was a desktop computer there, but there was no power to the building.

Blake found a syllabus for a journalism class on the desk, and a stack of school newspapers dated September 2013. So there was my proof that this town had been up and running recently. The student body was collectively termed the Hadwell High Acolytes. Weird for a mascot, but I went to a high school where our team name was the Crusaders, and that's kind of a similar thing. The school crest in the upper corner bore the motto "Donec totum impleat orbem." I looked it up when I got back to the motel. It means "until it fills the whole world."

The chart on the chalkboard turned out to be a list of class valedictorians since 1964, with dates and GPAs. Must have been for an article. I noticed that many, *many* of the students had the surname Hadwell. Seems a legacy went a long way in this town; that, or the family bred geniuses. The last Hadwell on the list had graduated in 2007 - first name Elizabeth. I immediately thought of Liz from the stories, but there's no way to be sure.

We decided to head downstairs to the offices, to see if they held anything conspicuous. The classrooms had yielded nothing that seemed important on first glance. It was far darker on the first floor than those above, and it felt more cramped, like the walls were closing in. Upon rounding a corner, Blake put his hand on my arm and stopped me, telling me to listen.

I heard what he did: faint music, as though from a distant source. I strained but couldn't make out if there were words or what the tune was. It drifted eerily down the hall. We followed it.

It was loudest when we entered a classroom near the front entrance, but still sounded muffled, as though it was coming through the walls. I identified the tune, though it was a bit slower than I was used to. It's a really well known song. "You Are My Sunshine." It played on repeat as we searched the room. As soon as it was over, it started again.

It didn't take long to spot a metal trapdoor in the corner of the classroom, looking out of place. I can't resist a trapdoor. It took the crowbar and Blake's biceps to pop it out of the ground, but once it was open the music was louder. It echoed out of the black hole in the ground, and I felt like we were getting close to something. We had to go down. I didn't want to, but we had to. The answers we were looking for were down there.

I got out my crowbar and Blake palmed his Annihilator, which is a solid demolition tool that could do some serious damage. Thus armed, we started down the steep concrete steps into the darkness.

The staircase seemed impossibly long. I kept looking back to the shrinking square of light shining through the trap door behind us. It soon disappeared in the pressing blackness and still we descended. The air grew colder around us, the walls pressed in. It felt like we were on that staircase for at least fifteen minutes, but my phone told me it was only three or four. "You Are My Sunshine" just kept on playing, growing louder.

On my next step, my foot hit the ground too soon and I lurched. Blake knocked into me, sending my flashlight flailing down the tunnel we'd just entered. The light flashed wildly in all directions as it clattered to the ground and rolled a good fifteen feet away. I watched it come to rest near the wall and sit there for a moment, the beam pointing towards Blake and I. Then it flicked off. I told myself it had broken in the fall.

The tunnel we'd entered was carved out of raw rock. It was narrow and low enough that Blake had to stoop slightly.

We moved forward, looking for my light but unable to find it. When we finally stumbled on it, it was fifty feet ahead, far further than it had been when I'd seen it stop rolling. It was totally dissembled - more appropriately, torn apart. Lens cracked, coils ripped out and stretched, bulb smashed. I was down a light source. And it seemed there was something else in the tunnel with us.

Gripping our weapons we crept forward in silence. I wanted to find the source of the music, if only to destroy it. If I never hear that song again it will be too soon.

Quite suddenly a door melted out of the darkness ahead of us, curved into the shape of the tunnel. It was made of heavy black metal. Etched into the center was the school's crest - the classic shield with a bunch of symbols. I can't remember the specifics of any of them, but I recognized it from the school paper. The door was unlocked.

I'm out of space here. I'll post about what we found behind that door tomorrow. Sorry about that. There actually were some answers.

Till next time.

Part 8

Things are crazy here. Blake is in the hospital, quarantined and injured. Heather and I are holed up in the hotel. I don't know what else to do. I'm so, so sorry I got anyone into this. It's all I can do to keep posting here to tell you what's going on. I have a feeling whatever this is doesn't want its secrets public knowledge, so at least it feels like I'm doing *something* to fight it. I'm losing hope.

A lot has happened since I last posted, but, as always, we'll keep it chronological.

The door in the tunnel opened into a small chamber, an intimate space but finely decorated. The stone walls were carved with intricate symbols, like none I've ever seen before. Runes, maybe, but I don't think they're Norse. I can't describe them. They made my head hurt.

Tapestries hung on three of four walls between stone pillars, each depicting a different scene from what I assume was the same story. The one on the left showed an androgynous person with long hair, sitting on the ground, head in his or her hands in despair. Behind the person stood a thin, solid black figure with no features, hands on his/her shoulders. It would have looked like a comforting guardian or angel if it wasn't so unnerving. At the bottom was the word "Electum" in those fancy medieval style letters. Latin again?

The second tapestry, across the chamber from the door, depicted that same androgynous person, only (s)he was split vertically down the middle. The other half was replaced with the shadow figure. Two halves to a whole. The hybrid creature had its arms outstretched, tendrils of darkness spiraling from the hands. Seemingly holy light shone down on it from above. The caption here was "Iunctum."

The last tapestry was to the right. It showed a crowd of people from behind, all on their knees, bowing to the black figure. The figure in the background was much larger than any of its worshippers in the foreground, and again the heavenly light beamed down on it. The word was "Elatum."

The gist of the last tapestry was easy to discern. The spread of this sickness, the masses on their knees. Donec totum impleat orbem. Until it fills the whole world.

The other two weren't so clear. Who was the person in despair? Did the half person-half shadow creature imply taking someone over, or was it a partnership? Was this something that had already come to pass or more of a prophecy? No way to tell at the time.

Blake didn't even pause to look at the pictures. As soon as the door was open, he strode over to the record player in the corner that was blasting "You Are My Sunshine." With one rough motion he shoved the entire thing off the side table it sat on and let it smash against the floor. The song cut out with the scream of the needle against vinyl. Blake stared at it for a second, then brought a heavy, steel-toed boot down on the player. Wood and metal crunched beneath his foot. He picked up the record from the rubble, a 1939 single of "You Are My Sunshine" by the Pine Ridge Boys, and snapped it neatly in half. I nodded. I was sick of it, too.

Other than the tapestries and the record player, the chamber only held a podium at its center. Two lit white candles stood on it, on either side of a black leather bound book.

"Notice anything weird about this place?" Blake asked. I almost laughed but I was too stressed out.

"Other than the fact that it's the inner sanctum of some kind of fucking cult? Oh, and the fucking candles are *lit*."

"There's no mold down here," he said. "Not in the tunnel, either." I hadn't noticed that. I wondered what it meant.

The leather cover of the book we found on the podium is branded with the Hadwell family crest, the same one all over the school and on the door to this chamber. Inside, the yellowed pages are set with dense type. They smell musty, with a hint of cigar smoke. It's a short book - only 138 pages. The writing style is flowery, akin to a bible. I think that's what it is, this cult's book of scripture.

I took it with us when we left. At that point I figured, as I had with the laptop, that we were fucked anyway. No point in leaving behind something important. We couldn't stay long, as it turned out. But I'll tell you about our escape next time. Right now I think you need some answers. I think you've been waiting long enough. And I think I've put enough clues together. I think I've figured out what happened and why, not that it helps anything.

I spent a few days reading that "bible." Perhaps "book of prophecy" is a more accurate term. I was raised Presbyterian (though I am no longer religious) and so I'm very familiar with the Christian creation myth and other biblical stories. The story of the universe told in this book was very, very different.

The story goes that at the beginning of time, when the universe was an empty void, the old gods awoke. Countless gods, nearly infinite in numbers, all of them able to bend the very fabric of the cosmos. Over the eons, with the vast darkness of space and time stretching out before them, they became bored. And that, to these powerful beings, was unacceptable.

To alleviate this boredom, each god created its own dimension, where it designed and dictated every natural law. Due to the jealous nature of these beings, soon these dimensions became closely guarded by their particular creators, to avoid their brethren stealing their secrets. Alliances were formed and rivalries were introduced. Walls between dimensions became thicker and thicker between enemies, and between friends they dwindled down to nothing. And in their cycles of creation and destruction, the gods were content.

Of course, one of these gods created created our world. His is a story you're probably familiar with. It's been passed down through many religions around the globe, including (but not limited to) Christianity, Islam and Judaism. You know, God-with-a-capital-G. But what all of the stories fail to tell you is that He's apparently really fickle, and bores easily. We weren't quite interesting enough for Him. God abandoned us long ago. That's one of the reasons the cult hates Him so much.

According to the Hadwell Bible, God-with-a-capital-G had a brother, who is referred to as "the Entity" and given the sexless pronoun "It" (with a capital I). God and the Entity had hated each other since time in memorium. The walls between their dimensions were as thick as any. But the Entity knew that God didn't deserve such a beautiful world as He had created, and when He abandoned His people the Entity grew angry. It decided to save us. It made a hole in the wall between dimensions and slithered through into ours. It planned to spread Its influence to all of God's abandoned children. Here's how the book describes the paradise It would bring:

"*And they that accept the Holy Gift shall be Ascended and they shall have Life Eternal. And they shall be no longer victims of fear, nor doubt, nor hatred, nor pain. And they shall be held close to their loving Entity. And they shall be One with It and with each other, forever and ever.*"

But God had foreseen this trespassing. He'd set "Cowardly" traps before He fled (God is often referred to as a Coward-with-a-capital-C in the Hadwell Bible). When the Entity came into our world, It found Itself weakened. Our dimension is hostile to It. It knew It would need a host or a partner, someone from this world, with whom It could share strength to do Its "holy work."

At this point, to me, the Entity sounds a lot like a parasite. But for some reason the cult seems to think being chosen is some sort of honor. The vague promises of Life Eternal and Ascension are enough to make them want it. There are no details as to what it entails, so they assume it's a good thing. I think we've seen enough of this so-called process of Ascension to know it's not.

And so the Entity bided Its time in the cracks of our dimension, waiting for the right vessel to come along. The final section of the book is a detailed prophecy that mirrors the story told by the tapestries on the walls. A Vessel will be chosen by the Entity, where It will incubate and grow stronger. The Vessel and the Entity are called "Two in One," but I'm not sure if that means that both consciousnesses are working together or if the Entity completely controls the Vessel.

When It is strong enough, the Entity will spread Its influence across the globe. The people will Ascend into paradise, becoming one with the Entity for all eternity. I don't know, that doesn't sound like a good thing to me. And, from the twisted forms of the infected people and their hideous smiles, it doesn't look like Eternal Paradise. It looks like Eternal Torment. The Entity is clearly manipulative. It's probably not even a god. I hope the cult came to regret their decision to facilitate this creature's rebirth into our world. Because they did facilitate it. The book describes various rituals and prayers that supposedly help It enter a Vessel.

I think the Vessel in question was born 25 years ago and has been active ever since. There was a birth certificate folded and placed in the back of the Hadwell Bible. The cult leader's daughter, Elizabeth Hadwell, born 1989 in Portland. Someone has written on the back of it "We have been waiting! All hail the coming of the Entity! Rejoice!"

I don't know that it's Liz from the earlier stories, but I believe it is. It makes sense that the infection started at the people closest to her. But the way she wrote in the Chicago series, how scared she seemed, how worried for Alan, how hopeless… Maybe she didn't know what she was carrying inside of her, which is so tragic. Then again, maybe she did. Maybe she's a villain, one who is very good at lying. I don't know.

Why am I so sure it's Liz? The names might be a coincidence. But for the last week I was in contact with a man who referred to himself as the Voyager - remember that Chicago number that texted me to go to the school? He said he wanted to help, and he was sure it was the Elizabeth we all knew, though he wouldn't tell me why. And I trusted him, because he seemed to know so much more about it than I did. He said he knew all of the people from the other series - Jess, Liz, Alan, Lisa, Alex. He said he even knew Z. Trusting him was just another mistake, on top of an enormous pile of the fuck ups I've been making for the past month and a half. And now, thanks to me, Blake is injured.

I can't type any more right now. I'm not sure when the next blackout will happen, and I'm not sure how long Heather and I have been in this motel room. The calendar says it's been a week since I last posted on Nosleep. But that can't be right. It felt like a couple days, max. We can only remember bits and pieces. She's suffering from the amnesia now, too, which makes me hopeless. We're definitely infected. Don't come looking for us.

I'll post again as soon as I can. I have this feeling It, the Entity, doesn't want me to. It's gotten to me, I know it. It's part of me, even if I can't feel It. It's watching my world from behind my eyes, latched on and biding its time. I'm sick. The light hurts my eyes, I can't eat. I feel angry all the time, or hopeless. Then suddenly I'll be laughing and Heather will be laughing and we'll just be rolling on the ground in hysterics. Ten minutes later, we're sobbing. I hate it. Is there a cure? Is there a way to destroy It? Can I get It out of my head?

How does one defeat a god?

Part 9

Heather and I took your advice. We went outside, trying to find some sunlight. She was especially enthusiastic about it, saying how smart you all were to suggest this. In my opinion, though, it didn't help. It was overcast but the light burned my eyes nonetheless, and afterwards I just felt exhausted. Heather said she felt rejuvenated though, so maybe there is something to it. We've made a point to go outside for a couple hours every day. At least every day we're lucid.

Time lost for both of us, in increasingly longer chunks. It's hard to type, too. My fingers don't feel as nimble as they used to be. So if there are any spelling errors, I apologize.

Blake is back from the hospital, floating on painkillers and antibiotics. We've made him as comfortable as we can in the motel room. We've also made sure no one comes into our room to clean or anything. Not that those services have been offered. It's a rundown, no-star motel with no business besides us. But the fact is I haven't seen the receptionist since we checked in. No one is ever behind the desk in the lobby. Is service that bad or did something happen? I'm not sure if that's something else to be guilty about.

As for why Blake was in the hospital, I'll get to it. Chronological, remember? For now, let's go back to that secret room in the school's sub-basement.

I didn't get a chance to read any of the Hadwell Bible when we were down in that chamber. Almost as soon as I grabbed it, Blake and I heard shuffling in the tunnel behind us, like someone walking with a pronounced limp. It pierced through the darkness, and for a long, silent moment Blake and I peered intently into the tunnel, unable to see jack shit. Then the door to the chamber slammed shut, sealing us inside.

I jumped away from the door so quickly that I knocked into the podium and sent it clattering to the ground, extinguishing the candles. Blake fumbled for his flashlight while I clutched the leather book tightly, not wanting to lose what turned out to be such an important document. I'd known it was significant as soon as I'd set eyes on it.

Blake was pushing at the door, pounding his fists into it so hard I'm surprised the wood didn't splinter. But it was solid, and locked firmly from the outside. I peered through the dense darkness around me, panicking, sure that I was currently standing inside my tomb.

With a furious curse, Blake spun around and grabbed me, bringing me close. Huddled together, we felt safer. Something was scratching at the wood of the door. I heard a muffled snickering, almost like hissing. The thing was *laughing* at us.

I'm not sure how long we huddled in the darkness, listening to the thing behind the door scratch and giggle. We sat near the fallen podium, Blake swinging his light around at every noise. Scratching and shuffling seemed to come from every direction, like we were being approached on all sides, but we saw nothing. At one point I closed my eyes and put my head between my legs when I felt the urge to vomit. Blake and his flashlight moved away for a while, and I drifted into scattered thoughts, oscillating between resigned calm in the face of my demise and flashes of panic. Hours seemed to pass.

Then Blake's hand was on my shoulder and he was dragging me to my feet saying he'd found a way out. He led me to the center tapestry behind the toppled podium and ripped it from the wall, his light revealing a hole in the stone there, just large enough for us to crawl through. I sobbed in relief and quickly followed him into the tunnel beyond. Neither of us cared where it would take us. We just wanted to get out of that fucking room.

The tunnel we entered was earthen and sloped upward at an increasing angle. We crawled as fast as we could, but before we were out of earshot of that room we heard the heavy wooden door slam open again. Blake pushed me ahead of him, desperately whispering "Go, go, go!" and I felt hysteria mounting as I heard the creature's dragging, skittering footprints echo through the chamber. It was following us.

At some point the dirt beneath our hands and knees turned to rough stone, and the tunnel widened until we could almost stand up as long as we kept our backs bent. The creature behind us had made its way into the tunnel, scratching and scuffling at the dirt. Its ragged breath filled the passage. I could hear every clumsy movement, every awful catch of its breath in its throat. I hated that I couldn't see it or even pause to direct the light on it to look.

It was when I had turned, craning to catch a glimpse of whatever was scrambling after us, that I hit the dead end. The wall had risen up ahead, abrupt and impenetrable, and I spent a long hysterical moment clinging to Blake, listening to the monster come closer and closer.

Then Blake shouted something at me, pushed me towards the wall and picked me up by the hips. "Grab on!" he demanded and I flailed my arms blindly before my hands caught the metal bars set into the wall. A ladder. The bottom rung was about five feet above the ground (about level with the top of my head) but once I climbed a few rungs Blake easily hoisted himself up. Adrenaline or simple brute strength, I didn't know. Nor did it matter. We heard the creature right below us, still swallowed in the darkness. It gibbered insanely, just noises and wild grunts. Blake told me later that he felt its hand catch the hem of his jeans, but when he kicked at it his foot hadn't connected with anything.

The ladder led to a heavy trapdoor that I'm sure, had I not been buzzing with adrenaline, I'd never have been able to push open. As it was, though, I got it open and crawled through it, collapsing onto cobblestone. Blake followed me and slammed the trapdoor closed, settling his entire weight on top of it. Breathing heavily, we looked around. We were outside, next to the school building, on a covered walkway that led down to the locked maintenance door we'd tried earlier. By some strange jump of time the sky was darkening, a bloated moon rising behind us.

A feeling of relief washed over me and I caught Blake's eye. We hesitantly started laughing, in the way of those who have just come out of danger into relative safety, though soon the laughter took on a hysterical note. Blake rolled around on top of the trapdoor and I clutched my stomach, back against the wall. Somehow I was still holding the Hadwell Bible and that only made me laugh harder.

Then a thump came from under Blake, a fist on the underside of the metal hatch. We sobered quickly, resolving to get away from there. Gathering our backpacks we hurried out of the walkway, jumping over the old caution tape that had been strung up at the entrance. A light rain was falling, and I felt a distinct sense of freedom and freshness. I'd been so optimistic then that the book in my hands would change things, that we'd been chased because we'd found something that could be our enemies' undoing. I'd been wrong. The answers inside, as you know, are not solutions to our problems.

But at the time I felt I'd already won, like that had been our last standoff. I decided to linger a bit, and took out my phone to take some pictures of the building. Blake took out his camera and snapped along. His actually came out. I think it's because we weren't very close to the mold.

Mine don't show much, but here are the only three that aren't blurry. Sorry about the cigarette in all of them, and the crappy quality. I needed a smoke and I'm clearly not much of a photographer.

Blake was snapping some pictures of the walkway while I went around the side of the building to take pictures of the fire escape we'd climbed. He didn't say anything at the time, but I guess he was distracted by the same sounds of shuffling from the direction of the tunnel. He said he watched as something came into view, keeping to the shadows low to the ground, avoiding the industrial lights along the walkway. He took picture after picture as it stood up, looked at him for a long moment standing in the light of the moon, then climbed over the guardrails and disappeared into a small hole set high into the wall. Back into the school. I was furious that he hadn't turned tail and run as soon as he'd seen it, but he'd said it was moving so slow and jerkily he felt sure he could outrun it.

Here are the pictures he took.

After snapping the last one, he made me get in the car. We arrived back at the motel, where Heather was waiting tensely. We'd been gone far longer than we intended.

I logged on to my email and found a message from the address rjtwlzbt@guerillamail.com. I'm familiar with GuerillaMail. I used it all the time in high school to sign up for sites I never wanted junkmail from. They give you random addresses that are temporary and disposable. The person who'd sent me the message did not want a response.

Here it is, copy n' pasted.

Claire.

You probably won't believe me, but it's worth a shot. I was good friends with Alan, and Elizabeth can go fuck herself.

I've read all the posts about the mold. Like Alan, I didn't buy it. Unlike Alan, I'm not an idiot. He was one of my best friends, but he was always naive. I'm an atheist but if God showed up on my doorstep tomorrow and told me to bow down I wouldn't spend the next few weeks hedging my bets.

That's why I bought a gun, and learned to use it. Don't kid yourself. This can't be cured. This thing needs people to possess, it needs bodies, by my reasoning, and bodies don't work with holes in them. None of this following-me-around-watching-me-shit you pulled on Alan and Jess.

I don't want to give the wrong idea about me, I'm not some badass who does this for a living. I was never very strong and I was never in a fight before this. I was a Computer Science major before I dropped out. Know what though? Coding isn't much good when Cthulhu turns out to be real. The good news for me and you, Claire, is that being smart and careful is worth a lot more than being strong.

NoSleep is a double edged sword. The truth is that the others posting there is what kept me safe and up to date, so I can hardly begrudge doing the same for anyone else caught up in it. But remember that others can read what you write. People you might not want knowing all the information. So be careful. But I want to ask you to post this email as soon as you can. Because I want Elizabeth to know that I know.

I'm speaking to you now directly, Liz. I'm glad you posted again, as /u/helpmenosleep and /u/alanpwtf. I know you control both accounts,

and I know how much you love fucking with innocent people for your own sick chuckles. I want you to know I'm coming for you, you bitch. I know you started this and there's a special place in hell for betrayers. You'd like them to think you got caught up in all of this by accident, but that's bullshit. You're no victim. You're the catalyst, the Vessel. Even before I moved to Illinois, when I was living in that town, surrounded by you and your followers, I made no secret of disliking you. It was a point of contention, because Alan and Jess loved you. They *loved* you and you betrayed them as soon as you had it in your power. And I will find you and I will destroy you for it, Elizabeth Hadwell. For everything you've done to my friends and that town and these new innocents.

Now back to you, Claire. I'm sorry you're here, you sound like a nice girl, but this is one of those things you don't get to walk away from. I tried, it doesn't work. You seem on the ball, just keep your head down and be careful, and don't try to help anyone who seems fucked because they probably are. Don't listen to Z either, there's no cure for this stuff, you read how that worked out for Alan. My advice, get a gasmask for when you're exploring.

Do these people a favor and don't share the town's location like they asked. I lost track of everyone months ago, unfortunately, and your findings are my best lead. That laptop you found. I want to see it. I think it's Liz's. It might tell us more about how to destroy her. She was always secretive and jealous with it, but I think I can get past the lock screen. Can we meet up? Bring your group if that makes you feel safer. I'm not here to hurt you. I know promises aren't worth much, but I promise you that. I want to help.

Text me. That Chicago number in your cell, that's me. Let me know when we can meet. We can help each other. I know more about this town than I want to and you have the laptop. Please. I don't know how to prove I'm trustworthy, so I won't try. But what do wither of us have to lose at this point?

Talk to you soon, hopefully.

The Voyager

I got that email two weeks ago but didn't post it before now, not knowing how long it would take me just to write out the accounts. Spoilers, we met with Clayton (that's the Voyager's real name). And I regret it, but maybe not for the reasons you think. This cult is dangerous and wily, and we need all the help we can get. But I'm not finished trying to fix this. Elizabeth Hadwell is the key, we all agree. The one Alan and Jess described as their best friend is the one in cahoots with the Entity. She betrayed them and got them killed, and now she's after everyone she can get her hands on. Stopping her may stop this.

Now if only we could find her.

Part 10

[Note: Claire requested I transcribe the journal entries she wrote during her experience in the Infected Town four months ago and post them here, as she is no longer able to do so herself. Hopefully they elucidate her findings and complete this story.

To be clear, the first of these entries pick up directly after she stopped posting on Nosleep.

My own explaination of the events, and why these entries are so delayed, will be posted in due course.

- Clayton (The Voyager)]

[Written on the cover of the journal:]

Clayton,

They deserve to know. Post these entries when you get a chance and tell them what you told me. Don't leave anything out.

It's my last request. You owe me.

Username: vainercupid

Password: ********** **[Omitted for privacy]**

Thanks. See you on the other side.

Claire

April 12 2014

No more electronics. Sorry nosleep. My phone's charger cable is rotted through, plastic withered away, wires frayed. I found it like that. Just woke up and it was like that. So my phone is dead, and my laptop is all fucked up.

This whole room feels like it's rotting. I feel like I'm rotting. Just withering up to die. I look at my hands and legs and they look normal, like nothing's changed. It's from the inside out. I feel crawling inside me, more than skin deep, like a trillion parasites wriggling through my muscles, my bone. I look close at my fingers and see along the nail beds the brown edges of decay and a thousand cigarettes.

The Voyager (his real name is Clayton), that fucker, took Elizabeth Hadwell's laptop. He said it would be more useful to him than to me. He said he could maybe fix this. I'm waiting for him to come back.

[A note from Clayton: I used the alias "Voyager" when I first started my correspondence with Claire, not wanting to reveal my identity. It is a remnant from my gaming days, and part of my email address. It was also a nickname from high school, what Alan and Lisa called me, later picked up by Jessica and Elizabeth.]

Time seems scattered, nonlinear. Of course I can't remember chunks of it, and I'm not sure how events are spaced, or which one came after the others. So I'll start with what I know came first.

Clayton and I talked a lot after his email. Texts, calls. I really had to be sure, or as sure as possible, that he wasn't trying to fuck us over. He said again and again he wanted to help, to stop this, that he'd do whatever possible. He said he knew Elizabeth, Jess, Lisa, Alan, Alex all of them. He promised to tell me his story when we met in person. He didn't.

I think it's clear Clayton is a liar, but he might be the only person who can end this. He said he could crack the password on the laptop and give me answers.

So we met up with him. Me, Blake and Heather. He told us to meet him on the bridge into town. We showed up and waited half an hour. Nothing. It started to get dark, I think. Then something started shuffling under the bridge, like scraping and moving around. We could hear it making its way closer. Heather freaked out and wanted to leave. But I refused. I was getting desperate. I already knew I was fucked and if he had a way out of this, I was going to listen.

The shuffling turned out to belong to Clayton, who was climbing up from his under-bridge encampment. I recognized his leather jacket immediately - he'd been with that girl in the dress when we'd driven through the town the very first time Blake and Heather were with me. He'd run and hidden from us.

He was an average guy. There was nothing about his physical appearance to suggest someone special. Young, about my age, tall with dark hair and a scraggly beard. He was filthy though, dirt encrusted, and he stunk. Like he'd been homeless for months. The voice I'd heard on the phone had been refined, precise in diction, so this surprised me. He clambered over the railing on the other end of the bridge from us and brushed himself off.

Not sure what exactly happened next. He didn't even say a word to us. I called his name and he nodded, keeping his distance, and flicked on a flashlight. He shone it on each of us in turn.

Then he staggered back, really fast, clearly panicked. I turned around in case something was approaching us from behind, but I only saw Blake and Heather, who seemed just as confused as I was.

Clayton started screaming at us. Stuff like "What the fuck? What the hell are you doing? Get the fuck away! Don't even look at me! Run away! Fucking monster! You fucking monster!" Really disjointed, situationally inappropriate. It sounded like the ramblings of a demented brain, to be honest. I realized at that point that he was insane.

Then he pulled out a gun. A black pistol. Took it from his waistband and pointed it right at us. Now Heather started screaming, and Clayton's yells rose to match. Then Blake started yelling too, pushing us behind him. I couldn't figure out what the fuck was happening. Fucking chaos. Blake took a couple steps toward the guy. I don't know why. Fucking idiot.

The gun went off. Blake dropped to the ground. Clayton took off towards the town.

The bullet went through Blake's right shoulder and grazed left Heather's ear. We were screaming even louder now, trying to stop the bleeding. I dropped next to Blake and put my hands against the wound like I'd seen in movies. Compression, right?

I don't know how but we ended up getting him in the car. Heather was bleeding and crying but she drove as I sat with him in back, still pressing my hands against his shoulder. He was really pale and in a lot of pain.

We drove him to the hospital immediately. It was only when we were halfway there that I realized I'd dropped the laptop on the bridge. No fucking way was I going back for it though. On top of mold and monsters and infection, we had a gun toting maniac to deal with too. It might even have been broken when it fell from my hands. There were no answers on it worth the risk, even if I could access them.

We asked the doctors to quarantine Blake, explaining he had an infectious disease. I don't know if they did or not. He was unconscious when we left. I hated leaving him, but Heather brought up the point that we were probably doing more damage just by being in a public place.

He came back to the motel a few days later, with a bunch of stitches and pain meds. He left before they wanted him to, though. He said he couldn't stay in a place with so many people, especially so many sick people. I'm sure the hospital staff thought we were weird hermit kids. Let them.

That's it for now. Can't write anymore. My hand hurts.

I'm so tired.

[A note from Clayton: Any and all additions/changes to Claire's journal made by me will be in these brackets and bolded, to avoid confusion.]

April 13 (?) 2014

Assuming it's the next day. Could be any number of days. Weeks, even. Just woke up. Might as well continue the saga, even though I'm doubting more and more whether anyone will read it. The worst thing about this self-imprisonment is the boredom. You don't realize how much of your time is spent on the computer or your phone until you're forced to give them up. Hours pass in silence, confined to a hotel room. Blake is sleeping off the last of his pain meds. Heather is sitting silent by the window. None of us feel like talking.

So I write. Maybe I'll make sense of it all. And the good thing is, if I black out, my words will be harder to delete.

The night after Blake returned from the hospital my phone was still working. And Clayton texted me a rather inscrutable phrase:

Clayton: There is a fox in the henhouse.

Even though I knew I might regret it, I texted him back. Since I don't have my phone and I never wrote down the conversation, this won't be word for word. But I'll transcribe it here to the best of my ability.

Remember. Remember.

[Clayton here. Claire's account of our conversation, scribbled in her journal, was only partially accurate. Here is the exact conversation that took place between us, transcribed from my own text logs. They are word for word, I assure you. There is, after all, no reason for me to lie to you, and I don't intend to.]

CLAYTON (1:03 AM): *There is a fox in the henhouse.*

CLAIRE (1:14 AM): *What the hell, man?! You shot Blake! Leave us the fuck alone!*

CLAYTON (1:15 AM): *I didn't mean to hurt your friend.*

CLAYTON (1:15 AM): *I'm sorry.*

CLAIRE (1:18 AM): *FUVK YOU! What the hell were you trying to do, waving a gun around? You're as fucking crazy as the rest of them.*

[At this point, I became wary of who may be on the other end of the conversation. The Entity and Liz have been known to be tricky and manipulative with their use of cell phone messaging, and the misspelling of "FUCK" unnerved me. As far as I knew, Claire may not have been the one texting me. I stopped replying.

As a side note, I believe the reason for the misspellings using keyboards is due to loss of motor function in the infected. As the virus rages through the human body, not only do muscles degrade, but flesh in the digits of the hands and feet becomes fused. This makes it extremely difficult for those possessed by the Entity to type or text.]

CLAIRE (1:27 AM): *I bet you're a cultist, too. I bet you're working for that cunt Elizabeth Hadwell.*

[This text gave me pause. I came to know Liz quite well a few years before all of this occurred (Alan was a mutual friend), and she would NEVER call herself a cunt. Elizabeth Hadwell is one of the most self-involved, self-impressed people I have ever met, and even if she was trying to trick me she would not insult herself. Neither would the Entity, if in fact they are separate consciousnesses. They love themselves and each other above all. So I replied.]

CLAYTON (1:34 AM): *I am not a cultist. And I would never work for Elizabeth. Are you alone? I need to call you. You need to know something.*

[Claire never responded. I'll let her explain the rest in her own words.]

At this point my phone died, so I don't know if he called me. I think I blacked out shortly after because the next thing I remember, I was waking up in bed and my phone cord was disintegrated. That marked the beginning of my time with no technology.

I wonder what he was going to tell me. I wonder

[The writing stops there abruptly.]

EDIT: To be clear, there is more to come. This was not the end of Claire's journal, and I have also promised to tell my own story. Another post will follow as soon as possible.

Part 11

[Clayton again, with more of Claire's journal. The next few entries decrease severely in clarity. It seems Claire was suffering some kind of mental break. Lines indicate page breaks.]

April 14 or 15 or 20

April showers bring may flowers.

Have that song stuck in my head. Heather won't stop singing it. I want to hit her. Want to fucking kill her. I wish she'd go ahead and do something fucked up so I could get revenge. But she just sits at the window. Just sits and hums and smiles. I try to remind myself she's just a victim in this, like Blake and I. But it does no good. Because thoughts like that lead to guilt at bringing her into this, and then I just get angry again.

I'm angry all the time now. Or I'm tired.

Blake, I love you. I wish you'd never met her.

I think there's something burrowing under my scalp.

Next time

Head hurts so fucking bad but it was a good day. Blake told a good joke today. What did the horse

What did

Fuck. I can't remember.

April March May whatever

Bad day. Head hurts. Don't know how long I was out. Can hardly write. Even candles are too bright.

Walked into Blake's room earlier to find him and Heather having sex. Heather on top. She looked at me with glazed eyes. Reached out to me like she was asking me to join them. But then she blinked and her face twisted into a snarl. She screamed at me to get out. Blake's face was so blank. His eyes were distant and he just laid there limply. Didn't even notice me.

I turned and left. I was really angry but I don't remember anything else.

How can they fuck in a time like this? How can they even muster up the energy?

Maybe it was just a dream.

I don't remember the last time I ate.

I'm not hungry.

FUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOU
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[The entire page is filled up with these two words, the writing getting more incomprehensible near the bottom.]

Mid April - Early May

Feeling really lucid today. Blake is up and about, too, looking better than he has in a while. Heather has been sleeping all day. She drank a lot

last night. But there's still color in her cheeks. The idea that we might be getting better keeps running through my head. How could we be, though?

Blake and I went for a walk around sunset. I think his shoulder's infected. Ha. Like the rest of him isn't, with something far worse. We thought about going to the hospital again, but when we checked the car we found the engine torn to fucking pieces. I don't know cars, but Blake says a bunch of important wires were cut or ripped out, and we found a sparkplug in the parking lot.

Besides, we probably shouldn't be around anyone else. The motel seems abandoned. We went inside the reception area today for the first time in a long time. No one there. Smell of earth and decay. Mold in the corners. Like I needed more fuel for my guilty conscious.

Spent the rest of the day rereading the Hadwell Bible. But I haven't found any more answers.

[A piece of paper from the Bible was torn out and taped here, as though it contained what Claire thought might be pertinent information.]

Page 108, verse 3

"*When It saw the Cruelty of Its Kin, our Entity felt shame for His disregard of Humanity. And so let it be known that our Race is Holy, and that we are Chosen. For without Man's presence, our Entity would not have crossed into this Realm and blessed the World with Its Light. And without Man the Entity would not linger in this hostile Realm. As we are valued by our Almighty, so must we value Ourselves. And the Church of the Entity is the most Holy. We are the Bringers of a new Era. Let Its light Bless the World. Let all Men Ascend.*"

Next day

I haven't blacked out in twenty-four hours. I don't know if this excites or scares me. Heather and Blake report the same thing.

Last night, for the first time in a long time, I went to bed myself, instead of simply blacking out and waking up there. I fell asleep easily around 2 am, after taking a much needed shower. I'm starting to hope…

Never mind. Can't jinx it.

I woke from a dead sleep around 4 to the sound of the door to my room creaking open. Light from the streetlamp outside spilled through the crack. I felt real fear again, that cold rush all over my body. I haven't felt so acutely since escaping that creature in the tunnel. It felt good, in a way. I felt more alive.

The door widened. I thought at first that it was Heather - vaguely feminine, short hair, wearing a dress. But as I blinked and the person lurched into the room, I realized it was far too thin to be her. Unnaturally thin, skin and bones.

The light from outside gave me a clear view as she pushed the door wide. A stiff old navy blue maid's outfit hung off the tiny bony frame. White, withered skin. Mostly bald head, with a few clumps of tangled black hair. The eyes looked swollen shut but the flesh around them wasn't bruised. Smile forced wide to the point of straining. Her head was twisted to an impossible angle, her ear close to her collarbone, like her face was almost upside down. She was missing her left arm at the shoulder but her uniform hid any wound that might have been there. Her left foot was bare and looked twisted. Reminded me of the gruesome results of foot binding.

I fell out of bed as I jerked away from her. I might have screamed, I don't know. She just tilted her head to the side and smiled at me. She tracked my movements easily, like she could see out of her sightless eyes. I grabbed my crowbar, but I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it. I didn't want to hurt her. She was almost certainly an innocent in this, someone I'd cursed to this fate by my motel choice. And my choice to explore the town in the first place. And my choice to fucking stick around. So many bad choices. I deserve this.

The thing in the doorway, what used to be a housekeeper and was now something else, opened her arms to me. We stared at each other for a long moment. Then she dropped to her hands and sprung.

She used her withered hands and feet to move, like an animal, much quicker than I expected from her. She was on me in a minute, her grinning face inches from mine. I noticed then how silent she was. Not a growl or a whine. Just short, shallow breathing through her teeth, extremely accelerated.

Her hand, the skin of it partially fused, forced itself between my lips, into my mouth. As deep as it could go, making me gag. It tasted like mold. I still can't get the taste out of my mouth. She would have reached down my throat if I had let her. I couldn't breathe.

I hit her then, with the crowbar. It connected solidly with the side of her head and she went sprawling away. She still did not make a sound but the crunch of her skull. I heaved, then drew in a gulp of air and stood up.

I went nuts. I couldn't see past the rage. No rational thought, just anger. I stood over her and brought blow upon blow against her skull. I smashed her teeth and dug the sharp of the crowbar between her eyes. There was no blood. The skin just parted like the flesh of a drained corpse. When I burst open her belly, thick black liquid oozed out.

I need to throw up.

Anyway, the short and long of it is I killed her.

I fucking killed her.

We buried the body in the woods.

[This page is stained with drops of water, as though she was crying when she wrote this. Claire had a lot of empathy for those things. This is not something I feel or understand.]

Don't know when.

I was in town this morning. Don't know how I got there but I was in a house, standing facing a corner.

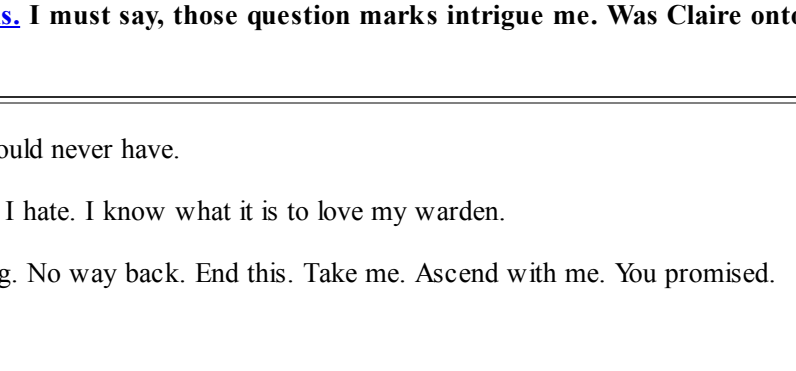
It was a long walk back to the motel.

[This is when I followed Claire back to where they were staying. I saw her wandering through the streets of town, completely out of it. She was talking to herself, as they will sometimes when they can still talk. I knew then, as I'd long suspected, that she was beyond help. Yet when she gained consciousness and left town, I also realized she was sometimes still lucid enough to want answers. And smart enough to stay close, not to carry the infection any further.

You must understand, I did want to help her. I wished I could. I liked the girl immensely, brave and stubborn as she was. It was just that I had no way of doing so.]

[The next page is filled with the rough sketch of a floor plan, clearly drawn by Claire. It only took me a few seconds to recognize it. I used to hang out there almost every day. It is Alan's apartment, the one he shared with Lisa.

I took a picture for you. Here it is. I must say, those question marks intrigue me. Was Claire onto something? Is there something of importance behind that wall?]



I love something I've never seen, could never have.

I know what it is to love something I hate. I know what it is to love my warden.

Please, please don't stop. Keep going. No way back. End this. Take me. Ascend with me. You promised.

YOU PROMISED.

[Claire seems to revert back into a muddled or confused state. I believe she is talking about the Entity here.]

[A scrap of paper is once again pasted into the journal. I recognize it from my own notes, a conglomerate pieced together from a wide variety of sources. Everything I knew or had learned or even simply guessed about the Entity and Its infection. The file into which the notes were gathered was stolen from my camp shortly before I assume Claire wrote this.

Clearly, Elizabeth or one of her puppets took it and brought it back to the motel. It could have been Claire herself, in a fugue state. Claire seems to at least vaguely understand the significance of this passage, and part of her still-conscious mind must have wanted to remember. Or perhaps this was the only portion of the file she could salvage. I have no doubt the rest was destroyed. Now everything the world knows about this comes down to what's in my head, and what's on this website.

Anyway, here's the scrap she had. It was not written by me, but by a group of scientists that had been living in the town during the outbreak. They'd studied samples of the mold collected by the police and even had a live victim of the infection at one point. I wish

I could have helped them further. They are all gone now.]

"*Stage three:*

Characterized by memory loss and ataxia. Apparent fugue periods lengthen. Moments of clarity still persist. Speech and motion is clumsy. Occasional numbness in extremities. Muscles seize in the face, resulting in a perpetual smile. Extreme sensitivity to light. Hair loss. Degeneration of the body. No appetite. Very little activity in the cerebral cortex. This has been the longest stage. To date, the patient has spent eighteen days like this."

Part 12

[Claire's journal. I hope this sheds light on many of your questions.]

I'm going back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. One minute I'm so happy I could scream, the next I'm so angry I could kill. Then the despair comes. The despair is the part I hate the most.

And so the cycle repeats itself.

I love It, I hate It, I love It again. I know logically, when I'm conscious, that this is part of the infection. It must be. No way I'd love the god or demon or WHATEVER that is fucking destroying my life.

But sometimes, when I'm alone, and it's just me and the whispering in my head, I'm filled with this golden, gentle peace. And such devotion, such LOVE. Even when I wake up sometimes and can't move my fingers or wiggle my toes.

I can feel blackouts coming sometimes. My vision goes grainy and I get mad. Sometimes all it takes is thinking about it. Like now

---

When Heather started dancing I started laughing. Then we were all dancing. Bared and dancing.

I could live like this.

I can't live like this.

Kill me.

Please stop this. Stop whispering. I know you're reading this. Please stop.

Come back. I know I asked you to go just now but I lied I want you back please you're the only one who understands me and I can't STAND IT I HATE YOU

FUCK WHY?? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING????

I remember youth's beaming anguish, waiting for the peace of sweet oblivion.

Waiting for the peace.

Waiting.

The Voyager is blindly loathsome, half-knowing, helpless.

My legs didn't work today. Had to drag myself around on my hands. Heather thought that was funny. I did too. But when Blake started crying, so did I. I've only seen him cry once before.

He knelt with me and cried and told me he loved me. Heather got really mad. She was smashing things.

We danced again that night. My legs didn't work so I just braced them against the bed and pushed myself up with my hands.

It's been weeks, I'm sure of it. Maybe even months.

Moments of lucidity are sparse, and when they're here I'm usually too tired to write. But now I have to get this down. With every mile between Elizabeth and I, I can feel her immediate hold on me loosening.

That doesn't mean I'm cured though. I still black out. I cannot walk. I think the muscles in my legs have atrophied. My skin is papery and pale. My ribs are jutting. It's hard to hold this pen. Clumps of my hair are falling out.

I used the wheeled computer chair to move around once my legs gave out, but it seemed like lucidity was back. Almost like the infection wants me to witness my own degeneration.

I found out what Clayton wanted to tell me. Took him long enough to find a way to communicate. Or maybe Elizabeth was preventing him. I don't know.

[She was indeed preventing me. I left countless notes at Claire's door and multiple photographs. It seems she was unable to recieve any of them, thanks to Elizabeth's vigilance.]

I've been lucid all day. But I didn't want to talk to anyone, so I just sat in my room, watching the mold creep up the walls. I hadn't seen the others, but I heard them mumbling through the conjoining door between our rooms. Heather was singing something, like usual. She did that a lot.

Human contact made me want to puke. It's weird to have this aching desire in me. I want something intensely but I don't know what it is. And what I DON'T want is to leave this room.

Around evening, just a couple hours ago, there was a sound by the door to the parking lot. A rustling, scraping sound. Startled, I looked over in time to see a thick manila envelope being pushed through the crack under the door.

I quickly wheeled myself over and scooped up the envelope. The singing in the other room stopped abruptly.

The front cover said "Claire: For Your Eyes Only." I recognized the Voyager's spiky handwriting.

My hands started shaking as I turned the envelope over and clumsily tried to open it. My hands don't work so well anymore.

[This appears to be true. Claire's handwriting has become steadily worse over the course of the journal. Some parts are nearly illegible, and others are simply scribbles. I have not transcribed the scribbles, for obvious reasons.]

It took me a good five minutes, sitting in silence, to open that envelope. But when I did, a photograph fell out. Or I should say, two pieces of a photograph. It had been torn.

The first, the larger bit, was a headshot of three people, all smiling. A blond girl with a nose ring, a familiar looking man with ashy brown hair and dimples… and Clayton. The photograph was ripped just to the left of his head, omitting someone from the photo.

There was writing on the back. I felt a deep sense of dread and turned it over.

There was a date at the top: October, 2009.

Underneath, in order from left to right, were the names of those pictured: Jess, Alan, Clayton &...

The picture was torn there. I looked down to where the other scrap had fallen face down on the floor. My whole body was shaking now. I picked it up and read the name.

Liz.

I flipped the photo over. I was finally going to look into the face of Elizabeth Hadwell, the Vessel, the girl who became one with god and started all of this shit. I was about to see what my tormentor looked like.

A pretty, smiling face looked back at me. Green eyes, short brown hair, red lipstick. An attractive, pleasant face. A face you wanted to keep looking at.

But to me, it was the most horrific thing I'd ever seen. Not because this girl was deeply evil. Not because she was the start of all of this.

It was because I recognized that face.

She was Heather.

In the other room, Elizabeth Hadwell, the girl I'd been living with for more then a month started to sing in a clear, high voice.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

You make me happy when skies are gray.

Then Blake was screaming.

How had I not figured it out? How had I been so BLIND for so LONG???

In the space of an instant, just as Blake began to scream, all the clues came crashing down on me, so obvious now that the truth was in sight. It had been right in front of me, roaring at me to pay attention, and I'd ignored it.

I'd come to Infected Town only once before meeting up with Blake. While there, I explored the apartment building and the police station. This, doubtlessly, was when Elizabeth caught sight of me.

She followed me. She FOLLOWED me all the way to fucking San Francisco. She wormed her way into my life through my best friend, Blake, who could never resist gorgeous girls with a touch of bad about them. She gave off this edgy vibe. She seemed fucking COOL. She'd orchestrated running into us at that bar and weaseled her way into his bed that night.

I hadn't cared, didn't get jealous (Blake and I often slept together whenever we were in the same town... we'd had a good thing going) because I was drunk and distracted by a man with ashy brown hair and dimples. He didn't stick around long, but I know thanks to that photo that it was Alan. He was doubtlessly possessed by Elizabeth, used to bait me so she could get closer to Blake.

FUCK HER. I FUCKING HATE HER.

I thought Alan escaped at the end of the Chicago series, when he jumped out the fucking hotel window to get away from her. At least, that's what she wrote happened. It could have been a lie. Even if he did run from her, she obviously managed to catch up with him.

So then Heather became a part of our life. She came with us to the Infected Town again. She cuddled Blake and joked around with me. I liked her okay, as much as you can like the girl who's fucking the man you love.

She kept up the charade flawlessly, which I guess isn't all that surprising. I've been told and shown time and time again that Elizabeth is incredibly manipulative. She fooled all of Nosleep, as well, when she was writing as Liz. She's a damn good actress, and now she could be anywhere.

And the thing is, she knows this. She and her Entity have been laughing at me since the beginning. She's even been dropping clues as to who she really is. Remember how H and E were always capitalized in all the messages she sent me?

HE. Not "he." They're initials. Heather Engels. Elizabeth Hadwell. H.E.

Toying with us. Always has been. God, she must have laughed herself into a fucking frenzy.

And Clayton's goddamn "fox in the henhouse"? Now we know who that is. We also know why he shot at us. Why couldn't he have just TOLD me?! Why did it have to go down the way it did???

[I ask myself this question often. I was being overly cautious, and it ended up fucking them over. I'm so sorry, Claire. I should have told you immediately. I should have helped you get out.]

I got to the room as quickly as I could when Blake's screams went on and on. Screams of true pain and terror. I dropped to the floor and dragged my useless legs as quickly as I could.

Opening the door was the hardest part. It was almost too much of a reach without any leg muscles. But I finally turned the knob and pushed.

Blake was on the bed, laying on his back, being pinned down by ~~Heather~~ fucking ELIZABETH. She knelt over him, her claws digging into his wrists. Her face was close enough that, had he not been yelling, I'd have thought they were about to kiss.

As I watched, she opened her mouth. Wide, too wide, far wider than humanly possible. She unhinged her jaw, like a fucking snake, and this black… SOMETHING came pouring out. I don't know if it was smoke or liquid or fucking WHAT. It shone like oil and it was just as black, but it floated in the air like smoke, descending too slowly and gracefully into Blake's open mouth.

His screams cut out with a gargle when it filled his throat. It was my turn to scream.

Elizabeth turned toward me sharply, the oily stuff retracting back into her mouth. It dribbled down her chin when she closed her lips. She looked furious, like something feral and… wrong. Her face was too long. It looked distorted, unsymmetrical, like a bad acid trip. She skin around her disjointed jaw hung slack. Her eyes were completely black and huge, much too large for her face. She opened her mouth again to complete, inky darkness. Then the mouth curved into a hideous smile.

I screamed again.

[I believe what Claire saw was the closest anyone has seen to the Entity's true form. It hides behind Elizabeth's skin, but apparently It will show Itself at times. I don't know what It was doing to Blake, but I believe it was something powerful.]

Elizabeth slithered off the bed dragging Blake along with her. She crawled to the center of the room, reminiscent of a spider, then dragged itself upright. She was holding Blake by the scruff of the neck, as easily as you'd pick up a wet towel. He was limp, his eyes rolled back in his head. I thought he was dead.

Elizabeth was much taller than I remembered her being, though maybe it was just my vantage point from the ground. She seemed to loom towards the ceiling, casting unnatural shadows in the already dim room. And she was smiling at me, almost benevolently.

She spoke in a voice that I'd never heard before. Like two or three voices at the same time. One was gutteral and raspy, the other high pitched as a child, the other… I don't know. Different. It didn't sound like it could come from her. It couldn't come from anyone.

"What are you going to do, sweetheart?" It asked me, shaking Blake a little by the neck. He moaned a little, casting hope into my heart.

I had no response to give. I had no idea what I would do. But, slowly, almost of its own volition, my hand crept over to find a fallen lamp on the floor next to me. The Entity or Elizabeth or whatever the fuck I was looking at couldn't see this behind the door frame.

When it spoke next, it was in Heather's voice. Or, I supposed, Elizabeth's voice.

"She's not moving, my love," she told herself.

"No," said the Entity's many voices.

"She's not getting the fuck out of our way." Elizabeth again. They took turns speaking to each other, having this fucked up little conversation. Like there were two of them there.

"No, it would seem she isn't."

"It's like she has a death wish."

"Perhaps she does."

"Maybe we should ask her."

"Maybe we should see how fast she can…"

"Crawl," Elizabeth finished the Entity's sentence with a malicious grin at me.

Knowing they were about to move at me, I took my chance and pelted the broken lamp at them. Her. It. WHAT THE FUCK EVER.

It hit her squarely in the face and she let out a roar of fury. I used her distraction to drag myself under the bed, the only hiding place I could see.

Elizabeth shuffled around in that other room for a while, breathing heavily and talking to herself. I caught snippets of a conversation about what they should do with me, what they should do with Blake.

"Let's stick to the plan, my love," Elizabeth's voice said.

"Yes, darling. Yes," the Entity responded. "Such a clever girl. Stick to the plan. My brilliant, beautiful girl."

Christ. Self love to the extreme. The way they spoke to each other… I know it's so fucked up, since they're the same person, in the same body… But the way they spoke to each other was how lovers speak to each other.

I'm really scared about what they were trying to do. I'm really scared about how they want to use Blake.

They didn't even come into my room again to look for me, like I was the least of their concerns. I probably was. Not like I could do much anyway. I laid there for eternity, listening to them thump and shuffled and mumble to themselves. Then, finally, the door to the outside opened and they were gone.

I dragged myself back into that room, frantically looking for Blake. But they'd taken him. They'd taken him from me. I broke down into tears.

I've been lucid since then. At least, I think I have. It's been about a week, maybe more. The worst week of my life. It seems, when Elizabeth isn't around, her hold loosens. Or maybe she just wants me conscious for this torture, this boredom and pain and despair. I don't think I'm getting better; I just think the infection is progressing more slowly. It's still going to consume me.

So now I wait for it, alone. I've lost everyone. I can't ask for help. No one could help me, even if I tried. I wish the darkness would just take me. Even if I'm going to be tormented for the rest of my life, at least I wouldn't be conscious for it.

Blake, I love you so much. I wish you were here. I wish I could help you. More than anything, I wish I could help you.

Mold climbs up the walls, over the bed, onto this notebook. Onto my hands. I've been laying here so long my legs are taken over with it. It covers them. I'm almost certain it's eating them, converting them into more of its kind… I'm glad they're numb. I think it would hurt.

My face feels stiff, and when I touch it I realize I'm smiling. Grinning, ear to ear. Even as tears roll from eyes, I smile.

I'm not getting out of this. And I'll wait here until the mold grows over the rest of me, or until I lose myself to the infection. Until my memories stop and I Ascend.

Ha.

Ascending straight into hell.

I welcome it. I long for the peace of sweet oblivion. I will embrace it gladly.

Wait. What is that?

Someone is knocking at the door.

[Thus ends Claire's journal. I, Clayton, will take up the narrative from here. But not now. Now I am too tired. The bad memories themselves are enough to make me wish I could be Infected.]

Jess's Story

Part 1

A bit of background:

My friend, we'll call him Dean, currently lives in an old apartment building that used to be a retirement home for many years. None of us believe in ghosts or other supernatural things (sorry, nosleep), but we all loved the idea of it.

Now... I'm not sure what I think. I'm worried, extremely worried. Because two nights ago, I was group-texting with Dean and my other friend - we'll call her Samantha. My name, in case you're wondering, is Jessica.

It started off as goofy, drunken fun since none of us could get together that night but still wanted to talk (we're best friends but I moved to a different city for college). Then it got... strange. I'm worried for Dean. Maybe you guys have some answers.

I think it's easier to just transcribe the conversation here:

[Dean's girlfriend is out of town and he's been lonely. He has just been talking about a daydream he had where the three of us were best friends in high school and ended up living together.]

Me: We'd probably have our own theme song. Like the quirky sitcom we are.

Dean: Town to town, two lane roads...

Me: Family biz, two hunting bros...

Me: *Three hunting bros

[We're huge fans of the TV show *Supernatural*, where that theme song is from. And nerds. Hence why I named my friends Dean and "Sam"]

[A couple minutes go by]

Dean: I was waiting on Samantha. She's probably having sex again or something.

Me: Drinkin out of cups, too probably. Bein a bitch.

Samantha: I'm playing cards.

Dean: I don't know that position.

Me: Haha me neither.

Samantha: I can't remember the rest of the song anyway.

[Here's where it gets creepy]

Dean: I think I just had a minor auditory hallucination. I heard a muffled young boy say something while laying down on my couch.

Samantha: Okay, you've been alone too long.

Me: A young boy? Weeeeeeird. Turn some porn on. Loud.

Dean: No fejdisndk porn jeez.

[I've never seen Dean make a typo in his texting. I don't know why, but a warning flag went up in my head. But I ignored it, figuring he was drunk.]

Me: I don't understand why you wouldn't.

Dean: Dnjdvhs lol. You're silly.

Samantha: Porn!

Me: haha do dnjdvhs and fejdisndk mean anything?

Dean: What?

Me: You made typos.

Dean: No I didn't...?

[Then Dean sends us this picture, with the caption "Amused face." I get even more creeped out. Why would he send that and act like it's normal?]

Samantha: You look like you saw the movie from The Ring.

Me: Haha that's creepy as fuck. Dean is drunk.

Dean: Brb. Phone is charging and some drunk asshole is making noise in the hallway. Idjits.

Me: [Half-joking] I don't like this. Be careful of ghosts. Get yourself some salt and some iron. Have you watched an unmarked VHS tapes of disturbing, dark imagery lately?

Samantha: Find the bones!

Me: He may have been cursed also. We have to consult the books.

[Immediately after I sent that, this same picture was sent three times in rapid succession from Dean's number. Samantha and I both assumed it was just Dean trying to creep us out.]

Samantha: Call Bobby.

[We went on talking for a bit, just Samantha and I. Then...]

Dean: Back. Guy must've ducked back into his apartment. Jesus, type more lol.

Me: [Still joking] Dude no not even you are surrounded by ghosts or Slenderman.

Dean: Har har.

Me: I'm just looking at the evidence here.

Dean: That I couldn't find the guy making noise?

Me: + the picture + the young boy's voice. SUPERNATURAL OCCURRENCES.

Dean: What picture?

[So I sent it back to him]

Me: This picture, which looks like a severe case of The Ring curse.

[A couple minutes go by.]

Dean: Okay, that is weird. When I sent that, it looked totally normal.

Samantha: Haha stop.

Dean: I've heard of pics failing like that at my old job though. It's just a hdnejdbe problem. Why are we talking about ghosts? This is silly.

Samantha: You know your apartment building used to be an old folks home.

Me: People died thurr.

Dean: Yeah, I remember.

[He then sends us this picture of his cat.]

Dean: Fuck. Alright, my camera is ojshneldhs fucke up.

Me: Dean, you need to lay down a circle of salt like now.

And he never responded. He hasn't been in contact since, more than 48 hours..This is insanely odd. We text every day. I called him four times today. No answer. His girlfriend won't pick up her phone, either. Samantha and I are extremely worried. I don't know what to do. What is this? Any idea? Help!

Part 2

Hey nosleep. Thanks for all your help and advice. Dean and his girlfriend still haven't gotten back to me. Neither has Samantha, which is even stranger (she and I are best-best friends). I don't like this at all.

The most advised course of action was to go to Dean's apartment and check it out. I was super nervous about this, since I'm a lone girl with absolutely no idea how to fight anything - supernatural or otherwise. But, taking what I know from my favorite show, when I got into town I immediately stole my mother's big container of salt and grabbed a wrought iron poker from her fireplace. You should've seen the look on her face when I explained I was going ghost hunting.

I went during the day, because I'm not an idiot. Everything outside the building looked normal - cars, trees, birds, crap like that. When I looked up to Dean's window on the third floor, however, something struck me as odd: the blinds were closed. I'm over there a lot, and I've never seen his blinds closed. I didn't even know what color they were - kind of grayish-black.

My plan of action was to just wait around outside the building and slip in when someone who lived there opened the door. So I stood there and smoked a cigarette and waited for like twenty minutes. I called Samantha, just to see, but again there was no response.

As I was getting bored and frustrated, the thought occurred to me to use the call box outside and call Dean's apartment. Stupid not to think of it earlier. Heart-rate accelerating, I went up and pressed #338.

The phone rang three times. Then it was picked up. At least, I'm pretty sure it was. The ringing usually went on a lot longer than that if Dean wasn't home. But no one said anything - there was just silence from the other end.

Then whoever it was buzzed me in.

Truth be told, this didn't scare me at all. In fact, it made me really happy. Something must just be wrong with Dean's phone. I kind of figured he could receive messages but couldn't send them. Or something. You know how phones can be.

So, all light and bouncy, I skipped up to the elevator and rode to floor three. Again, everything looked perfectly normal in the hallways - not even a flickering light bulb. The building is older, so it can be a little creepy, but I wasn't feeling anxious anymore. I was going to go see Dean and everything was okay.

When I got to his door, I found it shut but unlocked. Something strange - the brass numbers that used to hang on it, 338, were gone. Just six little nail holes in the cheap wood. It gave me pause, made me wonder if I was at the right door, but a quick glance around told me I was. None of the neighbors had lost their numbers. I knocked, but there was no reply. Dean can be kind of a dick like that, though.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

I kind of wish I hadn't.

The first thing I noticed was how dark it was with those blinds drawn. I tripped over a pair of shoes as I walked down their short hallway to the living room and cursed, then called "Hello?" Again, no reply. I flipped the light switch, and the overhead light came on kind of yellow and dim, like it was an old bulb.

Hastily, I went over and opened the blinds, thankful for the sunlight. The atmosphere in there was just sort of... unnerving. Which was strange, because that apartment is practically a second home to me.

I was alone in the apartment, I knew that now. It made my heart sink and my stomach flop. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. Gripping my iron poker, I quickly checked the bedroom and bathroom, even the fucking closets, just to make sure. No one else was here with me. So who had buzzed me in?

I looked for the cat, but she didn't seem to be around. Her bowl was empty, her water dry. I filled them, just in case, and opened a window so she could get in and out.

Other than that, nothing seemed out of place. The computer was still running. Dirty dishes filled the sink. All the lights worked, even if they were kind of yellow. The place was tidy yet lived-in, as usual. It was just that Dean and his girlfriend weren't here.

Then, desperate for *some* kind of human interaction, I called Samantha again. The phone wasn't to my ear for five seconds before I heard something buzzing in the kitchen. I went to check, feeling flushed and cold at the same time.

Her phone was lying there on the tiled floor.

As soon as I picked it up - the *instant* my fingers touched it - there was a crash from somewhere down the hallway, in the direction of Dean's room or the bathroom. Like someone had just knocked over a big pile of junk.

My courage failed me, even if it was only the cat. I sprinted the fuck out of there, slamming the door behind me. I took the stairs two at a time.

It wasn't until I was in my car, when my adrenaline had stopped buzzing so fiercely, that I realized how different it felt outside of that building. When I was in Dean's apartment, I'd had goosebumps and my hair was standing on end. It felt like there were eyes on me the whole time. This was only highlighted when contrasted with the normalcy of the outside.

So now I have Samantha's phone. It's locked, but I think I can figure out the code with relative ease. And my friends seem to be missing. I have no idea what to do about that. It makes me feel both helpless and angry. Should I call the cops?

One thing's for sure, something's not right. I need to figure this out. Any ideas?

I'll update if I find something.

Part 3

Today was incredibly long, so I'm going to try to sum it up quickly. Right now I'm frustrated and I want to cry, but I also want to punch something. I hate this. I'm writing it all down, mostly to try to make sense of everything, because I can't fucking sleep. But also because you've all been so helpful and compassionate and you seem to want to know what's going on.

I have no idea how to get ahold of Dean's parents, so first I called Samantha's mom, who was nearly hysterical. She and Sam talk regularly, but she lives in another state, so when I told her the story, I felt like I was causing undue distress. She says she hasn't heard from her daughter in a couple days, as long as I have, but she's called her a couple times to no avail. She also urged me to call the cops, like many of you. So I did.

Is it cliche to say the police were completely unhelpful? They were. I spoke to this Officer Robins on the phone and was told to go file a missing person's report on Dean and Samantha. I was told that, since Dean's girlfriend is out of town, it's reasonable to think he just went to meet up with her. Sam might've tagged along. They didn't seem impressed when I insisted they would have TOLD me if they were leaving town, especially since they know I was coming for a visit. We made plans to hang out this week. He disappeared!

So I went down and filed two reports. They promised to investigate, but also assured me he'd probably show up soon. No one has been found in the woods around here, no reports of any anonymous attacks or, ugh, murders. No neighbors have reported anything strange. They're not even going to check out Dean or Sam's apartments, since a search warrant is a lot of paperwork. So now I'm pretty much left sitting on my fucking thumbs, just waiting. Waiting isn't something I do very well. Especially when I'm concerned my best friends might be in danger.

Next I visited Dean's work and asked if he'd come in. The manager just looked at me funny.

"Uh no, we haven't seen him," he said. "But that's not surprising, since he called and quit two days ago. No notice, either."

That was the day after those text messages. That was after he'd stopped all contact with me or Samantha.

I would agree with a lot of you that Dean just went out into the woods and got lost or even hurt. There are definite forests around here. But Samantha disappearing only a couple days later? Her phone being left in his apartment? Resigning from his work? And where's the cat?

I know how it sounds. It sounds like he just up and left town. But WHY? As someone who knows him better than almost anyone, I can't possibly see him doing that. Especially without taking anything. What kind of trouble is he in? Is someone after him? And what happened to Samantha? I just can't shake the feeling that something weird is going on.

So now I'm left with my last clue. Samantha's cell phone. Upon closer inspection, the screen is cracked at the upper corner, as if it was dropped, even though it has a hard cover. I managed to unlock it with her birth date.

Everything looked normal at first glance. Picture of shirtless Jensen Ackles on her lockscreen? Check. Highly organized apps, including Reddit and Happy Hours? Check.

Then I checked her messages. First up were my twenty-five frantic "Where the fuck are you????" texts. Scrolling up, I read our last conversation from a couple days ago. We'd been talking about Dean and she'd been calling him an asshole for making us worry. Then I said I was going to bed, and she'd replied with her signature "Love you. See you sleeping." It made me tear up. What if that was the last thing she'd ever say to me?

My heart thumped as I looked at the next conversation in the column. It was the same night she'd texted me goodnight, but an hour later. And it was from Dean. He'd contacted her, and she hadn't told me.

I've transcribed it here:

Dean: Come over.

Samantha: What the fuck, dude????? Where the hell have you been??? Jess and I have been freaking out!

Dean: You shouldn't worry ahdld Me. I'm fine. Hahahaha silly.

Samantha: No. Not fucking silly. Why haven't you been answering your phone?

Dean: Come over.

Samantha: Answer my question!

Dean: I've been owkrgdh on something. I want to show you.

Dean: Come over.

Samantha: No! It's 1 am!

Dean: Please, I'm doing it for you.

Samantha: Doing WHAT for me??

Dean: It's a surprise. Ylu'kk love it. Please, Sammy.

[Samantha can't resist when Dean calls her by her nickname. Obviously, IRL it's not "Sammy" but it's something cute in that vein. He'd won this game.]

Samantha: Christ. I fucking hate you. You're lucky I'm bored. Okay. I'll be over in ten.

[Ten minutes pass.]

Samantha: I'm out front.

And that's it. That's the last thing she wrote. The rest of the convos on her phone are from last week. I checked her missed calls, her voicemail. All of them are from me or her mom. Nothing new or interesting.

Except the final voicemail, the one I apparently left when I was calling her phone in Dean's apartment.

It's just white noise for the first few seconds. I hadn't realized I was leaving it, distracted by discovering her phone in the kitchen. You can clearly hear the phone vibrating as I approach it. Then I say "What the *fuck*?" You can't hear the crash that occurred shortly after that. But in the last five seconds before I hang up, there's definitely something.

I've listened to this voicemail upwards of twelve times now. And I swear to God, I can hear someone *say* something. I can't make out exactly what it is, but it's this hushed, whispery voice. I think it's masculine, but I can't be sure. It says three syllables.

That's all I know. Of course, it could just be white noise or a rustling of my clothes. But what if someone else was still in that apartment with me? That thought makes my skin crawl.

And you know what else makes my skin crawl? The last two pictures on Samantha's phone.

Here they are.

Keep in mind, I have no evidence to prove that these were taken in Dean's apartment. Other than the fact that the picture taken before this is one of the puppy Samantha and I were playing with the day before. And obviously I have no idea whether they mean anything. I'm just starting to think this isn't all coincidence.

So that's what I'm working with here. I plan on continuing this tomorrow, but right now I need to sleep. Enough investigative work. I'm exhausted and stressed and I popped a Valium a while ago. Goodnight, nosleep.

EDIT:

You guys are not gonna fucking beleive this. Id just fallen asleep and my phone buzzed. it was DEAN.

"Come over."

obviously im not going to. I'm all valium'd up. i'll deal with it tomorrow.

Part 4

I wish I'd never gotten into this. I wish I'd never started digging. I don't know exactly what's going on, but something really fucked up is happening.

First thing, last time I mentioned the voicemail I'd left on Samantha's phone. I said I could hear the phone vibrate as I was getting closer. Someone brought up that this would be impossible, since the phone would have stopped ringing by the time the VM picked up. So, yeah. What that buzzing noise was, I have no fucking clue. I listened to it again. It does sound like a phone vibrating on a hard surface. Is there anything else that might sound like this??

So, as I mentioned, last night Dean texted me around me one AM. I was groggy and exhausted, so I didn't respond to him. I turned my phone on silent and fell almost instantly back to sleep as soon as I'd edited my last post.

When I woke up this morning, I had a bunch of missed texts from Dean. At first, before I read them, I was almost excited. Maybe he was finally going to explain what the fuck was going on. But my hopes were dashed almost instantly.

These were in the same group chat that started this whole debacle. Samantha's phone had died last night, and I had it, so clearly she wasn't responding. Here's the transcript:

Dean: Come over.

[Five minutes later]

Dean: Come over.

[Two minutes later]

Dean: Come over.

Dean: Come over.

[They're in pretty rapid succession at this point. I feel like crying.]

Dean: Come over now!

Dean: Come over, Jessica.

Dean: I have sinryibhk to show you.

Dean: Come over.

Dean: I'm with Samantha. I'm wiatign for you.

Dean: COME OVER.

Dean: COME OVER.

Dean: COME OVER.

[Half an hour passes]

Dean: See you soon.

That was all he said last night. This morning I woke up early, saw the messages, and immediately called him. No answer. I've become so accustomed to his voicemail message, I can recite it.

So I decided to play this fucked up little game. I'm getting sick of not having any answers. I texted him back.

Me: Are you okay??

[It took a good fifteen minutes for a response. I'd almost become resigned to not hearing back from him. But then my phone buzzed. I'm not exaggerating when I say my hands were shaking almost too hard to pick it up. One new message from Dean.]

Dean: I want to show you something.

Me: What is it?? Why are you being so fucking weird?? Where are you?? I'm not coming over unless you answer my questions! You're seriously freaking me out.

Dean: Everything is fine. I am fine. I read ykou story online.

Me: You did? Is that what this is about? Dean, please say something to reassure me you're okay.

Dean: If there was a real supernatural. If it was real. I don't think it would be like anything we know. It's not like *Supernatural*.

Dean: But I kjsk to go. I'll see you later.

Me: No! Please explain! Are you in trouble?

Dean: I just can't talk here.

[Then he sent me this picture. I've never seen that place before in my life. It doesn't look like his apartment building, but I've never been to the basement there.]

Me: Where are you?? Are you mad at me for posting our conversation online? I changed your name and didn't give any details. Is that what this is about??

Dean: It's scaring me.

Me: What is????? What happened to me in your apartment? It was probably my imagination.

Dean: Not your story. It's fsnse. I am fine.

Me: Dean, if this is you, you need to be safe. ARE YOU IN TROUBLE???

Dean: If there was a real supernatural. If it was real. I don't think it would be like anything we know. It's not like *Supernatural*.

[This is not a typo. He sent that same text twice.]

Me: Okay, the world isn't like *Supernatural*. What does that mean?

Dean: Did Samantha tell you?

Me: Tell me what?

[A couple minutes pass with no response.]

Me: Please, Dean, if you're both just messing with me, please stop. It's really scaring me. I filed missing persons reports on you guys!

[Dean sends me this picture]

Dean: I'm just telling you.

It's been hours since then. I texted him multiple times and there's been no response.

So, needless to say, I started this morning by freaking out. I called the police again and talked to the same cop, Robins. He said these texts sound like my friends are just messing with me and they're probably fine. I brought up the idea of a someone with Dean's phone and he said "We'll keep that in mind. Just don't give him any personal information in regards to your whereabouts." He told me if he texts me again, just don't reply. So, thanks Officer Robins.

You guys, this is all very unlike Dean. And Samantha can't leave her phone alone for more than half an hour, so the fact that she hasn't tried to get it from me is disturbing on its own.

I needed help. I needed someone who knew Dean and Samantha like I did, who would think this as weird as I do. The only person I really knew who was good friends with Dean was his friend from college. Keeping with the *Supernatural* TV show theme, let's call him Cas.

I didn't want to call Cas. I don't know him very well, but I had nowhere else to turn. So I did.

It took about an hour to explain everything. I had him read through these posts and, after copious assurances that this was not a joke, he finally admitted he hasn't spoken to Dean in quite some time. And Dean wasn't returning his calls or texts, either. He seemed concerned. But he also seemed curious, and ended up insisting that we visit Dean's apartment again.

I didn't want to, guys. Who in their right mind would? But I did. And I saw something that made me really question what exactly I'm involved with now. I don't think this is a serial killer. I don't think my friends are lost or left town.

After all, if there was a real supernatural, I don't think it would be like anything we know.

I think I'm going to leave our exploration of the apartment for the next update, or this will become too long. I'll post more in a little bit. Thanks again for all your help. I don't know what I'm doing anymore.

Part 5

“Cas” wants me to tell you that his real name is Alex. He doesn’t care if you know, the way I don’t care you know mine is Jessica. Also, he’d prefer not to be known as Castiel, haha. It’s kind of a relief, anyway. Giving all these people aliases based off of *Supernatural* is starting to make me feel like I’m writing some fucked up fanfiction or something.

I’ve gone back and checked out all your (incredibly helpful) comments. Again, thank you guys so much. You make Alex and I feel like we’re not alone.

It’s pretty much been agreed that that second picture in my last post was of an art piece in Chicago called the Bean, which I’d never heard of before. And last week, Lisa went to Chicago on vacation. So... there’s that.

The first picture, someone else mentioned, might be from a mechanic’s shop. Neither Alex nor I think Dean knows anyone who works at one, but it’s at least *something*.

Anyway, Alex and I met outside Dean’s building around one in the afternoon.

He mentioned he’d read through these posts for a second time, then a third. Again, as skeptical as the rest of us, he made me swear this was all true. I kept telling him I didn’t think we should do this. What if there was someone dangerous in the apartment?

But Alex waved it off. He said I was in there for a good fifteen minutes, and if someone had been there, I would’ve noticed. I thought this was a pretty good point. I’d checked all the closets. There aren’t any other places to hide in there otherwise - the bed and couches are too way low to the ground to squeeze under and there’s no other conceivable way I would’ve passed by some guy crouched under the table or something.

We were there, first and foremost, to see if Dean or his girlfriend, Lisa, were home. I had very little hope that this was the case, but Alex wanted to assure himself. And I wasn’t about to allow him to go in there alone. I have to admit, nosleep, I almost *wanted* to check it out again. I had the distinct feeling I’d missed something important.

I glanced up to the third story as Alex was keying in the code to the building (he’d cat-sitted for Dean and Lisa a couple months ago) and noticed something odd. The blinds were once again closed, greyish-black behind the glass. I’d definitely left them open the last time I’d been there. So someone had been inside.

This time, as we entered the building, I got goosebumps immediately. Though, of course, that reaction was probably completely psychological. We silently made our way up to the third floor.

Things were noticeably different as soon as we left the elevator. It was almost like the atmosphere I’d experience inside Dean’s apartment two days ago had... I don’t know... spread.

The hallway was only partially illuminated. Most of the lights were burnt out up here, and where they weren’t the bulbs were dim and yellow. Deep pools of blackness welled in certain corners and around doorframes. There was some kind of mold starting to grow on the walls near the ceiling - at least I thought there was. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but I could see thin, sparse veins of black mold creeping their way towards the floor. I hadn’t noticed that last time I’d visited.

It occurred to me at that moment that we hadn’t brought weapons of any kind. Not even my mom’s fucking salt. I mentioned this to Alex, who was starting to look wary at the state of the third floor hallway. He is reading over my shoulder as I type, and insists I inform you that he was not scared.

I was scared though. And I wasn’t comforted when Alex pulled out his little army knife. It wasn’t even iron, so if this was a ghost it was useless. Though I’m starting to think, when Dean said the supernatural isn’t like anything we know, he was hinting that iron and salt are not practical defenses against whatever’s going on. Though I might be reaching here.

Dean’s apartment door was still unlocked, the numbers still missing. I glanced around the hallway and noticed that a few other doors had lost their numbers, too. Maybe this could be explained by something commonplace though - maybe they were just being replaced or cleaned by the managers.

Shuddering, I turned the knob and opened the door.

It was dark inside, extremely dark. The only lightswitch that worked was the one in the apartment hallway, and it was dim enough to almost be brown. Alex and I used the screens of our phones for extra illumination.

This place seemed to be the source of the mold outbreak. It spread in spidery, weaving lines down every wall and in some places the plaster

was cracking. This was one extremely fast growing mold. I hadn't seen any last time I was in the apartment, and now it was fucking *everywhere*.

Again, that feeling that I was being watched came back with full force. I felt eyes on me every time I turned around. I mentioned this to Alex, and he just shrugged.

We began to search, slowly and quietly, staying together so as not to be caught off guard. I opened the blinds again, but it was an overcast day and the extra light didn't do much to alleviate the creepiness from the scene.

I checked Dean's computer and didn't see any activity for the past four days. There was a rank, rotting smell coming from the kitchen. We discovered its source was the little garbage can in there, but didn't want to go searching through it.

The only thing that was different about the living room from my last visit, besides the mold on the walls, was that all of the pictures that had been hanging above the entertainment system were on the floor in a pile of broken glass. Most of them were of Dean and his girlfriend, and a few had been torn in half. It was unnerving. There was a hint of anger in the way these had been thrown around. I started to get paranoid about squatters, and Alex yelled in his authoritative man-voice that this was the police and anyone in here needed to come out with their hands on their heads.

This garnered no response. We checked the hallway closets and the bathroom, and then entered Dean's room.

The mold in here was at its worst - the spidery tendrils of vein down the wall were thicker, and the air smelled of the spores. I gagged and put my hand to my mouth. I hate the scent of mold.

The bed was made, in the same way it had been last time I was here. It seemed untouched. Deep shadows welled in every corner, but I didn't want to climb across the bed to open the blinds. The lights didn't work in there.

I turned toward the mirror at the vanity and almost jumped out of my skin at my distorted reflection. The mirror was badly cracked, as though someone had punched it.

As I was looking at the mirror, Alex picked something up off the bed and brought my attention to it. It's a little notebook, like one you can pick up at Barnes and Noble. Most of the pages are empty, and a few toward the front are ripped out. Most of the writing is definitely not english, or any other language I recognize. I'll photograph and post it the first chance I get.

So then Alex and I decided to leave. The atmosphere in Dean's room was oppressive. It seemed difficult to breathe, with that damp smell of rotting soil lingering in the air. We went back into the living room and looked around one last time. Alex bent down to look at the broken picture frames on the ground again.

Still standing in the hallway, I heard something behind me. It sounded exactly like a phone vibrating. I spun around and shined my light down the hall, listening. The buzzing stopped. Quickly, I dialed Dean's number on my phone.

It happened again, a vibrating from Dean's room. We definitely hadn't seen a phone in there. Wanting to find the phone while it was still ringing, I motioned to Alex to follow me and raced into Dean's room again.

It only took a couple seconds to pinpoint the source of the noise. It was under the goddamn bed.

Slowly, not wanting to look under there but telling myself I was being stupid, I bent down. Like I said before, that bed is really low to the floor. The gap is only about three inches tall. Before I could get low enough to see under, something underneath, something I couldn't see, skittered toward me from the opposite wall.

I heard it distinctly and it freaked me out. Something was shuffling, dragging itself quickly across the carpet under the bed. I jerked away and ran out of the room. I only looked over my shoulder once, and I wish I hadn't.

In the split second I glanced back, I saw something retreat back under the bed, as though it had popped out at my approach but was going back into hiding. It was something pale and kind of waxy white, long and bony, like maybe... an arm? A really thin arm. Which is ridiculous, since no human could fit in that space.

Anyway only glimpsed for half a second but it made me gasp in horror. I was out of the apartment in a flash and already halfway down the stairs by the time Alex caught up with me.

I have no idea what it was, but I'll never forget the sight of it. The way it moved... it was kind of jerky but extremely quick. It wasn't a cat, I know that. Maybe some other animal, but definitely not a cat. There was no fur. It looked like white flesh.

Alex is staying over tonight. Neither of us want to be alone. I don't want to do this anymore.

Jesus. To make matters worse, as I'm writing this, Dean just texted me. Like, not two seconds ago. What he said should be obvious at this point.

"Come over."

Part 6

Hello all. Alex here. I'm making Jess relax while I update you quickly. She's very stressed out about all this, and I have to say, I'm beginning to see why. Dean is one of my favorite people, but I didn't know the girls very well before this. I guess, at the least, I made a new friend.

We're compiling a list of your suggestions, for ideas on what to do. Jess is adamantly opposed to returning to Dean's apartment, but now she has this desire to go check out Samantha's place.

I don't quite understand this. I want to spend more time at Dean's and look under the bed but she *really* doesn't want to go. And I don't want to go alone, or bring someone else into this. It's strange, but I feel that the fewer people that go into that place, the better. If only because of mold spores.

As per your advice, we called the police. Again. They're getting annoyed, it seems. Jess told them what she saw under the bed, but they pretty much accused her of an overactive imagination. They also say we have no business entering that building or the apartment without permission from the tenants. As for the mold problem, they suggested calling the managers because there's nothing they can do about it.

I don't think we should involve the police again, and Jess agrees. I don't want to get arrested for trying to help my friend.

But we did try to get in touch with the manager of the apartment building. Called a number of times. No response. I can't imagine he doesn't already know about the mold.

Again, I really think we should go back there with a weapon and some masks to prevent spores from getting into our lungs. I would like to talk to the neighbors. I'm currently trying to convince Jessica, so we'll see how that pans out.

Here's the honest truth: I don't think anything supernatural is going on here. I don't think the "supernatural" exists. But that doesn't mean it isn't dangerous. Jess seems to actually be entertaining ideas of poltergeists and monsters. That's ridiculous. I don't like that nonsense being put into her head. She's a bit unstable at present. I don't know what she thinks she saw under that bed, but it wasn't the boogeyman.

I must admit, though, the journal is weird.

Here is the album we made of it

I don't want to speculate as to who wrote it, but it is not in Dean's handwriting. Okay, honestly I have a feeling Lisa wrote it. She's always gravitated towards weird, dark things. Personally, I believe she did it for a bit of a laugh. Jessica is taking this really seriously though.

Again, if you could stop getting in her head with all your salt and holy water nonsense, I'd appreciate it. She says you're helping. I don't think so.

To make matters worse, last night she found something in her purse that she says shouldn't be there. Some kind of little pouch filled with herbs and a piece of paper. She has no idea how long it's been in there (girls don't clean their purses apparently). But she's freaking out over it. I don't think it's related to this, but she insists I post it here.

To me, it looks like a bag of pot pourri she threw in and forgot about. Despite the fact that it smells terrible.

Here's the bag before we opened it

And here is the piece of paper inside

Oh, and Dean hasn't replied since his late night text last night. I stayed up trying for a bit, texting from her phone, but got no response.

I know this is a bit anticlimactic for all of you, as far as updates go. But perhaps you can put your brilliant collective mind to work on that journal. I'm curious as to what language it's in.

Cheers. We'll let you know if we come across anything else.

Part 7

It's Jess again. I'm not letting Alex post here anymore. He's crazy rude. And probably crazy. You're all just trying to help. I really appreciate it, even if he doesn't. I'm not talking to him anymore, anyway. Shit just went down, guys.

I don't like all this talk of demons and botched rituals. If Dean and Lisa did some kind of ritual, it was all in benign fun. I'm sure of that. And I'm pretty sure neither of them has much knowledge as far as real-life demonology goes. So if they *did* do a ritual, they probably fucked it up. Which means whatever they were calling, if it exists, did not come through.

I think if one of them wrote the notebook, it was as an entertaining project or something. Maybe something for Dungeons and Dragons. I have a hard time swallowing that this is actually a demon, honestly.

So I'm not sure what I think. I think something really weird is going on. And I think I don't know as much about the world as I think I do. So I guess can't totally discount the idea of a demon or creature or spirit or something. Because I don't know.

Maybe Dean and Lisa were going crazy. Maybe *I'm* going crazy. Maybe demons are real. Maybe there's a lot more to this than meets the eye. Maybe it's a cult. Maybe it's a prank. Maybe it's aliens. Maybe Dean and Samantha are running away together. Or maybe it's a feral child living under their floorboards.

I have no answers.

Phew. So. I'm putting aside the demon theory for now, since it's way beyond me. First on the list of reasons I'm not speaking to Alex anymore - remember that satchel I found in my purse? He said something about getting rid of this nonsense and burned it when I left to get lunch. And like five of you told me NOT to burn it. If, as some of you have pointed out, it's dried lavender (and maybe garlic? Like I said, it smelled *terrible*), then he just burned something that someone put in my bag for protection. If it was something more sinister, someone mentioned he could have released something bad.

Then again, if none of that's real then... Better safe than sorry, right? Given, he didn't know burning it was a bad idea. But I was *pissed*. He laughed at me for being superstitious. If nothing else, he shouldn't have burned my stuff.

Anyway, we went to Samantha's apartment. I don't know what I expected, honestly. But it was completely normal. The only thing that told me Sam hadn't been here for a while was that her goldfish was dead. I checked for luggage in her closet and found nothing had been taken.

When I turned back around, I found Alex had been staring at me. Just standing there, feet planted shoulder-width apart, chin tilted down. He wasn't smiling. It gave me the creeps. It didn't seem sexual or wolfish, but it did seem dangerous. A little aggressive.

I asked him "*What*?" and he said we were wasting our time. We needed to go to Dean's and we should do so next time he texted me to come over. He said if Dean was okay, we hadn't run into him at his place simply because he *hadn't been there at the time*. If we went over when he actually asked us to, we'd see him. And if something fucked up was going on, at least we'd be getting answers "instead of digging through this bloody closet."

I asked him what his problem was. He said he was sick of all this fucking around and moping and trembling. He said we had to face this head on and figure it out. I argued that it was dangerous. And he stepped toward me.

His stance scared me, brimming with aggression. He had murder in his eye, I swear to God. There was a threat there. He's much bigger than me. I ended up agreeing to go next time Dean texted me. I figured he wouldn't until tonight, and I'd figure out some way to ditch Alex before then.

I didn't. He lingered, and no hint of mine could make him leave my place. He commandeered my cell phone, and Samantha's, after a while. So he could make sure I wasn't lying to him, doubtlessly. It was really scary. I don't know this guy very well, and now he seemed to be getting tense and possessive. He wouldn't let me post here, wouldn't let me call anyone. He even came outside with me when I went to smoke. I was too scared for my safety to do anything. We just sat there and watched TV, waiting.

As ten PM rolled around, I hatched a plan. If I was asleep, maybe he wouldn't make me go. I went into the bathroom and slipped a Valium. Thirty minutes later, my head was lolling back on the couch. I heard Alex sigh in annoyance as I curled up for more comfort. Soon I was deep asleep.

The first thing I noticed, when I woke up, was the smell. Stale and earthy and oppressive, like I was miles underground. Pressure was building in my head and it ached horribly. I sat up quickly, extremely disoriented. I'd been dumped on the floor and my back twinged at any sudden movement. The darkness that surrounded me was not the gentle moonlight of home.

It took me a second to recognize where I was. The shadows were really dark in the corners, almost too deep, and it made distinguishing details really difficult. But after a bit I realized with a rush of terror that I was in the lobby of Dean's building, laying on the ground about ten feet from the front door.

None of the lights were on. I'd never seen the lobby this dark. My phone was laying to my left so I picked it up and shone its light around. My hand was shaking really bad but I could see the mold had spread from the third floor. It welled in every corner and snaked from there in spidery tendrils down every wall, across the ceiling. Are we sure mold can grow this fast? I'm not even sure it *is* mold anymore. Sure smells like it, though.

Thinking about spores, I put my sleeve over my mouth and tried to stand up. Both my legs were asleep, which made it slow going and uncomfortable. I didn't want to touch anything, but I ended grabbing the column that rose to the ceiling next to me for help. I'm pretty sure I touched the mold, but I didn't see anything on my hands.

Can mold grow on glass? It took me a second to locate the glass front doors because they were covered in it too. They blended in with the walls. Maybe it's some other kind of plant, some kind of vine.

Thinking of you guys, I snapped a couple pictures, then turned the camera around and took one of myself but... you're not going to be pleased with them.

Here's the album.

The flash blinded me, so before getting the fuck out of there I stood for a second, blinking, trying to regain my sight. My ears were ringing for some reason, too. But through that, I heard something behind me.

The layout of the lobby is a large room with two rows of columns from the front doors. Opposite the front doors, at the other end of the room, are the elevators. Two hallways branch off perpendicular to the lobby on either side.

The sound was coming from the hallway to the right. I couldn't see past the wall, and I didn't want to get closer to check it out. It was sort of a scraping, shuffling noise. Like someone was slowly dragging something heavy along the ground. It sounded like the corners of whatever was being dragged would catch on the carpet every so often and there'd be a small thump.

I gasped and backed away from it. At the noise I made, the pace got quicker, louder. I could hear footsteps in time with the dragging, and some other noise. Like when you pop a knuckle, but numerous times and rapidly.

I booked it for the door and ran. It has never felt so good to be outside. My ears didn't stop ringing until I was ten blocks away and finally stopped running. I walked the rest of the way home.

I think Alex brought me there. He's gone and I haven't tried to contact him. He apparently took Samantha's phone, since it's gone from my house. He left me with mine, at least. I'm wondering how long I was unconscious in that lobby. I wonder if there was any health risk to being exposed to that mold (or whatever). I wasn't hurt though. And I obviously haven't disappeared.

I took another picture of myself when I got back to my place. It's not reassuring. I think there's something wrong with my phone.

Here's that

I hope Alex doesn't try to get back in touch. I just want him out of my life. I want all of this out of my life.

I checked my phone when I got home around four in the morning. Dean had texted me at 1:03, while I was sleeping.

Dean: Don't be scared.

Dean: I am fine. Everyone ud fine.

[A couple of minutes pass.]

Dean: I want to ajiew you somethinb.

Dean: Come over.

[About ten minutes go by.]

Dean: I'm fine. Everything is fine.

Dean: I can brhirng you to the rest of them.

Dean: I will show you.

[He sent me this picture. I think there's a face in the upper left hand corner of the reflection. The hair looks like it might be Dean's but I can't recognize any features. Anyone know the city?]

Dean: All ylk have to do is come over.

[At this point I assume Alex texted him back from my phone. Because I definitely didn't send this text.]

Me (Alex): Be right there.

I called the cops. We're meeting this evening, and they said there's a good chance I'll have to go back to the apartment to show them everything. I don't want to, but I know I'll have to. They're finally taking this seriously - the word "abduction" keeps getting thrown around. I'll update when I get back from our meeting.

Part 8

Tonight was the worst of my life. I'm here in my motel room with a couple cops outside. At least here I have a little security.

I guess those pictures Dean sent are from Chicago. That's at least a day's drive from where we are. But the phone is definitely in that apartment building. So either he doesn't have it, or he has a teleportation device.

So I went to the police station and they immediately had me take them to Dean's apartment. I brought them up to speed with everything, and they finally admitted something was going on. They'd tried to contact the apartment manager multiple times, to no avail. People generally don't ignore messages from the police.

It was me and four other cops - Robins, Morgan, Brown and Niles. When we pulled up outside and left the squad cars, I pointed out to them that the blinds in Dean's apartment were closed once again. They agreed that someone must have been inside since I visited. Brown smiled bracingly and showed me his gun. He said there was nothing to worry about.

After punching in the door code, which I'd learned from Alex, Niles and Morgan went inside to make a preliminary sweep before they allowed me to accompany them. I told them the apartment number, but they came back to say all the numbers were gone from every door in the building. So I had to show them where to go. Robin and Brown stayed outside to make sure no one else went in. We're in a small town, so they said this procedure was as good as they could make it. They didn't have the resources to get a big team in here but they were in constant contact with the station and each other.

It was the same as it had been last night, mold everywhere. We all had masks on this time though. Niles mentioned that it was the strangest fungus he'd ever seen. They scraped off a sample for analysis.

The atmosphere was extremely oppressive. I got goosebumps as soon as we entered, and I saw Niles shiver a little. I felt eyes on me from all directions. It's an unnerving sensation, feeling watched and not being able to find the source. I kept looking around, super on edge and twitchy, so much so that Niles put his hand on my shoulder and told me to calm down.

The elevator wasn't working. The up and down arrows had been worn off the buttons and it didn't seem that electricity was going to any part of the building. So we took the stairs. They gave me my own flashlight halfway up.

The third floor was even worse than the lobby or the stairwell. Mold seemed to be taking over the light fixtures and a few of them had dropped and shattered on the ground. The wallpaper was peeling and flaking off, and we had to step over debris and broken glass on our way to Dean's apartment. I couldn't get away from the smell.

They did that whole police thing, where they rap loudly at the door and demand whoever is inside to open up. Then they went in with their guns drawn. I lingered nervously in the doorway as I watched the beams of their flashlights bounce around, checking behind me every two seconds. Finally, Niles waved me inside.

The smell hit me in the face like a truck - that same rank, soily smell, combined with a more acrid, chemical note. They asked me to look around and tell them if it looked the same. It did not.

The couch cushions used to be cream colored, for one thing. Now they were the same gray-black as the curtains. They looked stained and rotten, and flattened with heavy use. It was as if the apartment hadn't been inhabited in twenty years. Most of the dishes in the sink were broken and covered in green mold. The rotting smell in the kitchen was particularly bad.

The mirror in the bathroom was cracked now. The shower head was letting out slow drips of brackish water into a stained tub.

We went into Dean's bedroom. The bed was still made and didn't seem to be deteriorating. The glass from the mirror was piled on it now though. Morgan asked me to call Dean to see if his phone was still here.

I did so, shaking violently. We did hear a phone buzz, but it was very far off and kind of echoed, like it was coming through the walls.

Morgan and Niles flipped the mattress up and onto its side.

The first thing I noticed was that the underside of the mattress was completely carved away. Or maybe burned away. It was black and rotten, a concave shape. If I had touched the top of the mattress, I would have noticed it had been hollowed to only a couple inches thick. Because of this, there was enough room between the mattress and the floor for a full sized man to lay there in relative comfort. I felt like I wanted to puke.

The next thing I noticed was the cover of the vent in the wall had been torn away, taking plaster with it. It had been covered by the bed, but now I could see the deep black hole where the vent tunnel stretched back into the wall. I wondered who or what was in there.

Morgan was updating the other officers as to this turn of events, and said that whoever was in the building was probably using the outdated ventilation system to get around. He mentioned that all the vents might connect, and that they'd need a bigger team than this to explore the entire place.

I wanted to leave at this point. Niles and Morgan agreed that I should no longer be there. But they had one more favor. They asked me to call Dean for a second time. I did so, and we listened to the buzzing as the noise traveled up through the vent. Niles slowly bent toward the opening.

Something shuffled inside, pretty close to this wall, moving away quickly. Niles jumped back, startled. I could hear flesh slide against metal and the quick pattering of hands or feet. I closed my eyes and pressed myself against the wall by the door, as far from the hole as I could get. Niles and Morgan had their guns trained and were shining their lights inside. They didn't see the source of the noise though.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Niles said. He was clearly unnerved, and even Morgan seemed concerned. They both steered me out of there at a brisk pace.

I'm not really sure what happened next. One second we were all in the stairwell, me in front, them behind. Then I rounded a corner and they weren't there anymore.

I started to panic as I swung my light around to look up the stairs and wait. Nothing. No movement. They'd been *right* behind me!

A stairwell in an apartment building, when the lights are out, is the darkest place in the world. I had to get out of there as fast as possible. I was crying at this point. I've never been more scared in my life. So I ran down another two flights and pushed through the first door I could find, screaming for Niles and Morgan

I hadn't gone into the lobby. I could've sworn I was on the ground floor, but as I scanned my shaky light around I realized that I was in the building's basement. Even in the dark, I recognized the long hallway immediately from the picture Dean had sent me a couple days ago.

Here it is in case you can't remember. Like that but much, much darker.

I backed up toward the door, realizing I'd have to go back into that fucking stairwell. My ears were ringing, badly, and my head suddenly hurt like a bitch. There was a shuffling off to my right and, on instinct, I swung my light toward it.

Alex was standing there, his back to me, facing a large piece of machinery. His arms hung limply by his side and he just seemed to be staring at the pipes in front of him. Panicked, but also kind of relieved, I called his name. Slowly, very slowly, he turned to look at me.

He was smiling. *Hugely*. So big it must have hurt his face. As I watched, his lower jaw slowly dropped until he was just staring at me with this huge, open mouthed grin. Like he was *so fucking excited* about something.

But he wasn't moving otherwise. He hadn't even turned to face me. He was just looking over his shoulder.

Then I heard the scuffling again. It was farther down the hall from Alex, but he didn't seem to notice. He was still just staring at me, silent and still and smiling. Almost apart from my own volition, my hand directed the light beam toward the noise.

I don't know exactly what I saw. It (he?) was too far off to be sure, just out of range of the light. But it seemed to be belly to the ground, dragging its legs behind it with its front arms. It was terribly thin and kind of waxy white. And it was upping the pace, lurching toward me with those horrible popping noises every time it moved its arms.

I didn't see its eyes or nose. Again, I wasn't close to it. But it looked like the upper part of its face was just smooth, white flesh. But I saw its mouth - too large for its face, stretching up all the way to what would be its cheekbones. The teeth looked gargantuan - human shaped, but much longer. It was smiling, too. *So fucking excited*.

I stood there staring for what seemed like eternity, unable to scream or move. Then it stopped in its tracks, just before it came clearly into my light, and, slowly, its lower jaw dropped, revealing the black void behind those teeth.

That broke the spell. I was out of that basement in an instant. As I raced up the stairs I heard the basement door open again and someone chasing me, feet pounding quickly. I assume, now, that it was Alex.

All four cops were at the entrance, confused and panicked at my disappearance. I didn't even speak to them as I burst outside. After that, I demanded to leave *now*. It was only once I was safe at the station that I explained what I had seen. With worried faces, the cops said they were going back there.

I'm leaving town tomorrow. I'm going back home. I'm done. I'm sorry, but I'm done.

Dean, Samantha, and Lisa... if you end up reading this, please let me know you're okay. I love you guys.

Part 9

Don't be dhxyqd.

I am fine. Everything is fine.

–

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[[WHO cIS{{JHE..LP{(INGHIM<.,S[1]1]]

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WEaR>E-//OP*eN,fOR{BU{S?"INESS

Liz and Alan's Story

Part 1

I think you guys might know what happened to me. That's what my friend hinted at. but she won't say anything else. No one will answer my texts or calls. I called my mom and she told me to go fuck myself and that she was going to call the cops if I harass her again. Then she hung up. The fuck is going on?

Yesterday, I woke up in a hotel room in Chicago. I have no idea how I got there.

I was fully clothed and I remember the first thing I thought about was how hungry I was. The second was where the fuck was I and what was I doing there? I figured out pretty quick that this is the Hotel Sheraton in Chicago, Illinois. My room is paid for the next three days. Otherwise, I have no idea what is going on.

The last thing I remember is sitting on the couch at home in Oregon, in my boxers, texting my friends. We were talking about our favorite show or something. My girlfriend was out of town so I was alone in the apartment. The doors were locked and I wasn't tired. Some drunk assholes were making noise in the hallway. I went to check it out and there was no one there. I came back into my apartment.

And that's it. Next thing I know, I woke up here, six states and more than a day's drive away. My bags are unpacked and my coat is neatly laid across a chair. According to the calendar, I've lost *a week*. I have no memory of it. *What the fuck?*

Desperate for answers, I went to check my phone to see if anyone was trying to contact me. But I don't have my phone here. At least, I can't find it. Instead, I have my girlfriend's. Our phones look similar, but we've never mixed them up before.

She had a bunch of missed texts and calls. Most of them asked where she was and what was going on. My heart sank. She was missing, too. I need to find her. Thinking she might have my phone, I called and texted my own number but got no reply.

I went into text history and found two pictures had been sent from this number to my own phone in the time I'd been out. Otherwise, no activity from this end. The pictures kind of tug at memories in the back of my head, but I can't access them.

The pictures, in case they help.

A couple of the texts were from my friends, Jessica and Alex. It's weird, because they and my girlfriend never text each other. Jessica in particular seemed frantic, asking where I was and where my girl was and where our other friend, Liz, was. She'd called a bunch of times too. Since she's a good friend of mine, I tried to call her and it went straight to voicemail, like her phone was off. I texted her for good measure, asking what was going on and explaining what happened.

She replied instantly:

"Hagahahajskn Ask nosleep."

As a redditor, I know what Nosleep is but I'm not a frequent visitor. So I'm asking. Do you guys know what's going on?

Jess won't get back to me. Neither will anyone else who seems to know anything. Most disturbingly, my girlfriend, my best friend Liz, and Alex are also not responding. I'm miles from home and flipping the fuck out.

So I'm turning to you guys. Because I'll do anything to figure this out. I found something that makes me think I did some stuff during my blackout. I don't want to call the cops.

I'm overwhelmed and confused. What the hell is happening? Does anyone have any answers? Help me, nosleep.

EDIT:

Someone gave me a link to what my friend, Jessica, apparently wrote on here. I'll keep reading and see if I get any answers. You guys are quick. Thank you.

EDIT 2:

Dean is a fucking ridiculous name. My real name is Alan. "Samantha's" real name is Elizabeth.

Part 2

I underestimated how big a deal this was to you guys. I have to say, I appreciate it. It makes me feel less alone - at least someone fucking cares. Thank you, all of you.

So, in case you're not keeping up, my friend Jessica wrote a series of weird nosleep posts about her experiences shortly after I blacked out and apparently disappeared. In the posts I am called Dean (my name is Alan) and my friend Elizabeth, who also disappeared, is called Samantha. The posts ended with the understanding that whoever has been fucking with us got to Jess and Alex.

Right now, my girlfriend Lisa and my friends Jess and Alex are missing.

Elizabeth called me yesterday though. Thank fuck. I talked to her on the phone and she sounded okay, if shaken. She lost a few days in an unexplainable blackout, like I did, but she woke up before I did and has been trying to get in touch ever since. She is still in our hometown.

Apparently she woke up in the basement of her apartment building, which is now evacuated due to a heavy infestation of mold. Just like my own building. This mold seems to be spreading.

I spent today and last night reading through Jessica's posts and most of the comments. It was actually astounding. Right now I know about as much as you people, but I'm definitely not jumping on that supernatural bandwagon.

I agree, things look really weird from what Jessica wrote, but I truly think there's a logical explanation for everything here - the mold, the person in the vents and in the basement of my apartment building, Alex acting weird, the texts, everyone disappearing. I don't know if it's drugs, illness or even a government conspiracy but *there is no such thing as monsters*.

First off. That journal that Jessica mentioned in Update 4.5 isn't a clue. I doubt it has anything to do with this.

Lisa used to be a dabbling Wiccan. She still sort of believes in the power of rituals and manifestation. We were goofing around, conceptualizing a story about angels and demons that could maybe be used as a Dungeons and Dragons campaign. She pulled out her old Book of Shadows from high school, ripped out all the pages and looked up Enochian on the internet. Then we wrote some bullshit demon invocation ritual in Enochian. It was just something like "We summon you, we welcome you, we invoke you." According to your comments, we're not very good at Enochian, which makes sense, as we researched it for about five minutes.

Then she wanted to try it. She said it would be fun. I was humoring her because we'd fought about bills earlier. We found some chart of demon symbols online and picked Hismael the Acquirer because he sounded like he could "acquire" stuff for you. Her friend is a Satanist, and he told us Hismael was a pretty chill dude. Lisa drew a Satanic summoning circle on a piece of poster board and wrote our names as one and two in Enochian in the journal. I added Jess and Liz as three and four. We were supposed to be the targets of Hismael's generosity.

So we sat on our bed with candles and incense, and chanted the invocation three times. No response. I couldn't stop laughing when Lisa told me she felt something in the room with us. I blew out the candles, got up and went to the kitchen to get a beer.

That was that. We did the ritual two weeks before shit went down, long enough that even I forgot about it. I'm not sure when Lisa ripped the other pages out of the journal, or wrote "I am not sorry," but I assume she did it shortly before she left for Chicago.

I don't think she did make it to Illinois. I called the friend she was supposed to meet and she said Lisa had texted her cancelling the plans a day before I saw her leave.

I *saw* her leave, though, that's the thing. Bags packed and everything, big smile, all excited to go. I waved from bed, still half asleep, and said "I love you." I haven't heard from her since. She must have left her phone and I must have taken it. Is it repetitive to say I'm worrying my ass off?

I took a plane home to Oregon today. I found my wallet in my jacket, with all my credit cards. The card used to book the room was my own, but other than that there were no charges this week. No money spent on food or tourist activities or *anything*. I talked to the guy at the front desk, and he says he remembered checking me in.

"I know this is going to sound weird," I told him, "but what was I like? When I checked in." He gave me an odd look so I shrugged. "Project for school."

(Obviously I'm paraphrasing these conversations, but this is the gist).

"Tired," he replied. "You didn't say much. Just asked for a room and shuffled away when you got your key." He thought a second. "You were smiling the whole time, but you didn't sound happy."

Okay, so there doesn't seem to be any leads there.

As if memory loss and the disappearance of friends isn't fucked up enough, it started to get really weird when I left the hotel.

On my way out to catch a cab to the airport, I was grabbed firmly around the upper arm. A hundred thoughts rushed through my head as I turned toward the guy who'd stopped me. Had I met him while I was blacked out? Had I wronged him? Was he a cop or some kind of security guard? For some reason I can't remember, my immediate reaction was guilt. Perhaps *because* I can't remember.

The guy was tall, broad-shouldered and looked like a Goth or maybe a metal-head. I don't know what to call the style. He had on those big black buckled boots, grey jeans tucked in and a long brown trench coat. His hair was black and long, down past his shoulders, half-heartedly formed into dreadlocks. It looked like he dyed some strands different colors, blue and purple and green. His skin was pale and he wore eyeliner and black lipstick. He wasn't ugly, just weird looking. Kind of a big, tall guy.

I'm describing him, because I'm wondering if he's one of you guys. Or if he matches the description of anyone you know.

He stared at me for a long moment, searching my eyes, then seemed satisfied and let go of my arm. I jerked away from him. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"Listen," he said in a deep voice, too quick for me to interject. "We can't talk long. You might still be contagious. I know what's going on with you, and I know you're going back. Nothing I can do about that terrible fucking idea. But if you get near the mold, wear a gas mask and don't breathe in the spores. Don't touch it and don't let any of the others near you. I cured you once but it can take you again. It's not like antidote grows on trees. Carry this everywhere." He stuffed a little black satchel into my hand. "Email me if you have questions. I'll answer what I can." He handed me a piece of paper this time. "Be careful."

And he slipped out of sight in the afternoon crowd. I followed him for a sec, yelling "Hey!" but lost sight of him quickly. That comment about the mold had sent me reeling, and I was still recovering from the shock. It all happened really fast.

I wondered if he'd just handed me drugs or something, if I was about to be tackled by cops, but then I opened the little satchel and found, of all things, dried lavender inside. The paper contained only an email address: deltaseeker.z@gmail.com. My cab driver was yelling at me, so I just stuffed everything in my bag and left.

Is this one of you? Or do you know this guy? If you don't want to say publicly, *please* PM me. I assume he read Jess's account, but I don't know how he could have recognized me.

Anyway, now I'm in a motel. I ran by my apartment building when I got back into town but it's all locked up, police tape across the entrance. I just kept walking.

Lizzy is with me now. She's fine, alive and well and normal, but shaken and worried shitless. Won't stop crying after reading Jessica's posts. If any of you have any answers, share them. For me and my friends, for everyone involved with this mold issue, please share.

Someone mentioned a type of fungus called cordyceps and I have to think this is something like that. But whoever that guy is, he knows more than I do. I already emailed him with a million questions, but have yet to hear back.

Part 3

I emailed the man I met. I pretty much drilled him with every question I could think of. What's with the mold? The lavender? What was that thing in the basement? How can I stop it? Can we cure Lisa or the others? And on and on. The email was very long. I gave him all my contact info.

He replied a couple hours later. I copied and pasted his response here.

Re: It's Alan

From: Z <deltaseeker.z@gmail.com>

To: Alan [Redacted]

07/24/2013 1:33 PM

Alan

I know you want answers. If I was in your position, Id want them too. I cant tell you everything at the risk of losing my job though. Years of fighting will have been for nothing if we are shut down or discovered. The anonymity of the internet allows us to communicate, but I will not call the phone number you gave me and it is probable that we will never see each other again, as long as you keep your nose out of trouble.

So, bearing all of this in mind, I will answer what I can.

We are a group of people who solve problems like the one you are experiencing. There are many, many groups like us. Among other things, my organization has been keeping tabs on the mold issue since its first documented appearance in 1788. Thats all I will say about my organization.

As for what kind of mold this is, [...]

The bag of lavender acts as a [..,]. You may not want to believe, but sometimes "mumbo jumbo," as you refer to it, [,...] We've found that lavender works well and is very cheap and easy to find.

If you don't like thinking of this as magical, you can consider this creature extremely [>>>].

However, THIS DOES NOT MEAN YOU CAN KILL IT. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO.

We have been trying for more than two hundred years. [...[; preventing it from spawning again across the world is another. In a sense, we only know how to treat the symptoms, not the disease. We do not know how to kill the source. [:D]

Any attempt you make will only anger it, and it will hunt you with a vengeance. [come].

This thing can affect your brain and body in various ways. When possessed, a human [...] Eventually and invariably, the infection ends with death. Its one purpose [./.].

[.;;]. What happened with you and Elizabeth is not the norm.

There's very little hope for Jessica [Redacted], Lisa [Redacted] and Alex [Redacted]. From what Jessica wrote, we know at least one person in this case is beyond help. This thing is very clever, and it knows us well. Do not expect miracles, but let us do our job.

I read your posts on reddit.com/r/nosleep, after someone from the site emailed me asking about the "thing in the vents." It was foolish to post your story online, much less my email address. As I said, this thing is clever, and it will use [///].

[...[

I suggest you leave town with Elizabeth. We aren't your babysitters though. Your pit is only as deep as you dig it. As long as you don't fuck up our investigation, we won't have any issues. But I can't promise I'll be there to save your ass next time.

Luck.

Z

I am trying really hard not to write back to this "Z" that he and his "organization" can go fuck themselves. I know he reads this, though. So thanks so much for nothing, asshole. No solutions. No real answers. Just a couple warnings and telling me my friends are fucked and there's nothing I can do about it? Coldly explaining that there's "really no hope"? Telling me that there's shit out there I don't understand? Yeah, no shit!

FUCK YOU, Z.

I'm not saying he's not right about the mold, or even the fucking "being" he mentioned (though that makes me think he's fucking with me). I'm going to be careful, but I'm also going to take it with a grain of salt. He did know who I am, and he did have a few answers. But no help.

In any case, I'll do this with or without him or his little group. If such a group even exists. Probably just a bunch of pimply hackers with too much time on their hands. Or maybe it's just this one dude, trying to fuck with me.

That's really all I have for you tonight. The only other thing of note was that when Elizabeth went to pick us up some Chinese for dinner, I received a text from here. Here's what it said:

LIZZY M (6:05 PM):

```
I need help.
```

I thought for a moment that she meant she needed help carrying the food in from the car. She'd only left five minutes ao, so that was extremely fast. I decided that couldn't be it. I texted back.

ME (6:07 PM):

```
With what?
```

LIZZY M (6:07 PM):

```
I heilsrd you were backin townnnn
```

Seeing the typos made me realize: Liz didn't have her phone. She'd lost it when she'd gone to my apartment that night, just before she'd blacked out. Seeing the apartment empty had creeped her out, and she'd heard some kind of moaning and run for it, thinking a homeless guy was squatting in my bedroom. She'd dropped her phone in the kitchen. Of course, according to Z, she'd gotten infected then or shortly before.

ME (6:08 PM):

```
Who the FUCK is this?!!!
```

A good fifteen minutes passed. Liz returned home and I filled her in. She got very pale. Then:

LIZZY M (6:23 PM):

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This is not a fucking game Alan.
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LIZZY M (6:23 PM):

```
[...]
```

LIZZY M (6:23 PM):

```
:) :0 ;) Sorry Al. Didnt mean it.

Trust ni one. They are LYYING. Youi wikl be sorry.
```

LIZZY M (6:24 PM):

```
Just come home.
```

LIZZY M(6:24 PM):

```
Please come home.
```

Now I know how Jess felt. This may be the most significant thing that's ever happened to me. I'm going to figure this out. I need to.

Part 4

Weird things are happening in town. I'm getting pretty sure everything's connected to the mold, but of course I can't be completely positive. It seemed so fucking ridiculous only three days ago but now I can't think of another explanation. Too many coincidences not to tie in.

Our town is quite small - population around 4,000. Lizzy and I have been staying in a motel about three miles from it, only going in for groceries, so we didn't notice for a couple days - but there's definitely something going on.

I noticed it first when I went to the supermarket at five on Thursday. Despite the meager population, these hours are usually really busy. But there was not a single other person in the store, besides me and the checkout clerk. Not one. The clerk seemed really happy to see me - he was creeped out too - and mentioned that a virus must be going around because people are calling in sick and staying home all over town.

He's right. It's a fucking ghost town out there. Used to be, you'd walk down the street and see a bunch of people, most of whom you recognized. Now the only things that greet you are a few seagulls. Most of the small business are not open, and the corporate ones are run by a skeleton crew. Apparently not showing up to work is becoming an epidemic.

None of the landline phones work, and cell reception is only available in certain three foot diameters at a time. We live pretty deep in the woods, so reception used to be slightly annoying at times. But now you can't get it except by chance, and then only for ten minutes at a time.

I've taken to carrying a respirator mask around with me. Call it paranoia (but I know you probably won't). You've seen the evidence. This mold is taking over my town. I haven't seen it anywhere outside, but there are enough "Closed for Maintenance" notices on the business doors around here that I get the hint.

Did I mention the police station is dark and locked up, too? It looks fucking abandoned. At one point one of the windows was shattered somehow, so there are all these boards and caution tape along one side of the building. I'm half expecting the FBI or a SWAT team to bust in due to lack of communication with our officers, but I don't know how that works. You'd think the county would be concerned. Then again, it's only been a few days since this place started looking deserted and I don't know how often our station is supposed to report to county.

No one will answer their doors or phones, either. I was walking around my neighborhood, just checking it out, and saw movement in the window of this grumpy old bastard's house. I stopped and turned. There he was, this eighty year old guy who always snarled at us when we step on his lawn, standing erect in the window. And grinning. Just fucking smiling, really wide. I've never seen that man smile. He was smiling *at me*.

It took me a second to realize that his eyes were closed. But as I continued to walk, he kept turning toward me with his face and body, even though he couldn't see me. I'd say he just has really good ears, but the guy is practically deaf. Then he stepped back from the window, really jerky like he'd forgotten how to work his body, and disappeared.

Yesterday I saw a woman in a blue dress standing on a street corner with her back to me. I hadn't seen many people outside, so I hailed her as I was coming toward her. She seemed to be looking up to the sky, but when she heard me her head kind of snapped to the side and turned to look over her shoulder. The movement was unnatural - sharp and quick. Twitchy. I stopped in my tracks as soon as I saw the grin on her face.

She began to turn towards me. Slowly, almost mechanically, one shoulder lowered as the other one raised and her arms moved out from her sides almost as if she was getting ready to do the robot or something. She misplaced a step as she turned and with this sickening *pop* I watched her ankle bend and the side of her foot hit the ground. She didn't seem to notice. Her smile didn't even flicker and she made no move to correct the position of her foot. She just kept standing on it like that, all lopsided. I'm pretty sure it was sprained or broken. The angle was unnatural for an ankle.

When she'd come fully around to face me, her arms went limp against her sides. But she tilted her head toward me, extending her neck, and grinned, like, *maniacally*. Then, moving clumsily on her twisted ankle, she lurched forward.

I ran before she'd gone two steps, knowing instinctively that she wouldn't be able to catch up. It had taken her a good two minutes just to turn in place, after all. I returned to the motel without any of the items from the grocery list for Liz. It seems safe and normal beyond the borders of town - the motel staff is friendly and blissfully unaware - but as soon as you drive past the sign that reads "Welcome to [Redacted]," the change is almost palpable.

Okay, here comes the part I've been dreading telling you. I know it was stupid and I don't need to be lectured, so please don't. Every scolding you can think of, I've already heard from Liz and thought to myself.

This happened the day we got back into town, before I realized how weird everything was or how far spread this seems to be. Wanting answers and feeling very angry and self-righteous, I left Lizzy when she was sleeping. I went back to my apartment building.

Yeah. I went back. At night. At the time, with my respirator mask, heavy duty flashlight, gloves and black clothes, I felt like a splinter cell or something. The hugest badass in the world, off to solve this mystery once and for all. I even had my bag of lavender, figuring better safe than sorry.

Now I just feel fucking stupid. It was probably the biggest mistake I've ever made.

I waded through a bunch of caution tape only to find the scanner at the front for my keycard wasn't working. Neither was the keypad for the code. There was a door around back in the parking lot that usually wasn't locked, so I headed there. I flinched as I squeezed inside after putting my mask on - the door hinges squealed really loudly. I'd forgotten about that.

Once inside, I saw the scope of the damage instantly. Mold, or something, covered every wall and ceiling. In some areas it was even starting to creep onto the carpet. It had somehow peeled back the wallpaper in certain places and almost every light fixture was grown over or shattered on the floor. In the corners the mold became three-dimensional, building up on itself to create these toxic piles. I stayed away from the corners.

Jess mentioned feeling watched in this place, and she wasn't kidding. I wasn't ready for how fucking creepy it was. As I moved slowly down the hallway into the lobby, every time I turned around I firmly believed there'd be someone behind me. There wasn't.

Starting to regret my decision to come here, as you all warned me I would, I didn't want to head upstairs or downstairs quite yet. I kept hearing shuffling and thumping from above me, like someone was moving around in their apartment, but this place was supposed to be completely evacuated.

So I started in the lobby, checking for clues. I actually might have found one - a police officer's hat lying on the ground, already being taken over by mold. Actually, up till then, I hadn't been freaking out. But seeing that piece of clothing, something no cop would purposely leave behind, it set me off. I'm not sure why, but it deeply unnerved me. I turned away from it, suddenly very ready to leave.

There was someone coming down the hallway behind me, at the other end of the big room. Frozen in place, every muscle tensed, I watched the shadow's slow jerky movements, his impossible posture. Inch by inch, I put my light on it, needing to know exactly what I was looking at.

He didn't notice me. He was walking along the back wall, not even looking my way, but somehow I recognized Alex immediately.

He was very thin, his clothes hanging off flesh and bone. Chunks of his hair had fallen out, leaving his skull patchy. But the worst thing... I don't even know how to describe this. I almost feel like I was hallucinating, but I know what I saw.

He was bent backwards at a ninety degree angle. I'm not shitting you, it was a perfect right angle. His back was totally straight and parallel to the floor and he was looking towards the ceiling as if laying down. His legs, from maybe just above his hips, were planted firmly on the ground and taking slow, jerky steps. His arms hung loosely, dragging on the ground. It was impossible. His back was clearly broken. He should be paralyzed or dead.

I couldn't help the sound of horror that escaped me. At the noise, Alex's head snapped sideways toward me and I saw his huge grin, stretching wider up each cheek than it should. I swear to god, his teeth were longer and more numerous. It felt like a terrible acid trip.

Then he started for me, skittering sideways like some huge fucked up crab, grinning madly. He was pretty fast, too. I've never been more scared. Luckily I backed up into the front doors and got out. I heard something inside bang against the glass, but I couldn't see thanks to all the mold.

So that's what happened. I burned the clothes and the gloves and let Liz scream at me for two hours. Alex is seriously messed up, and I have a feeling Lisa and Jess are too. This whole town seems sick. It's been a couple days now - no sign of mold at our hotel, and I feel fine. I emailed Z but he's not responding. Soon Liz and I plan on getting the fuck out of Dodge but I just feel like I need closure. I need to know for sure Lisa isn't coming back.

Part 5

Hey guys. It's Elizabeth. Alan gave me his password because he doesn't feel like dealing with any of this anymore. I can't say I blame him.

It's been ten days since Alan last posted and we both feel guilty for leaving you hanging like this. We're not dead, but not much happened for a while. Nothing worth writing about, anyway.

We ended up moving further away from our hometown, Veneta, which I wanted to do from the start, but Alan kept insisting we stay close. Finally, after that Z guy contacted up again, he agreed it was best to get away. We've made our way into Washington now, this tiny town called George. (Ha. George, Washington. Just got that). I'm saying this so Z can find us again. We want to get to Seattle.

Alan's sleeping at the moment, which is for the best. Sleeping is rare for both of us nowadays. We seem to toss and turn all night, and when we do fall asleep? Jesus, the nightmares.

I feel plagued. I may not be turning into whatever Alex was turning into, but[both]r of us feel *normal* anymore. It's more than just losing our best friends and everyone else we know. It's that constant itch at the back of your head, the goose bumps that don't end. The rushes of crippling anxiety so strong that all you can do is stand with your back to a corner and scan the room for movement.

It's like something is following us, but there's no mold or monsters. I don't even want to go see my mom. I mean, I *really* **want** to but I feel like everyone we come into contact with is in danger. Chalk it up to paranoia, I guess. Horrible fucking paranoia.

Except, as we found out recently, it's not all in our heads. We're anxious for a reason. At least, I think so.

Z may be forthcoming in emails, but in person he's fucking enigmatic. He won't answer many questions. He kept saying the less we know the better, so we won't think about it as much. He said obsession is an unspoken ritual, and it draws attention. Whatever that fucking means.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. A week ago he showed up at our motel near Veneta. Alan told me about him, but that didn't prepare me for the shock of opening the door to a broad, six-foot goth guy with a grim expression. The dreadlocks were immediately recognizable.

He came in, sat us down and said, "Are you two fucking retarded or something?" I must have looked really affronted, because he rolled his eyes at me and continued, "Don't give me that look, sweetheart. Your friend here has been a pain in my ass for weeks." He turned to Alan. "We've been busting our chops to keep up with you two, *cure* you, and now I hear you're fucking prancing around your old building?"

Alan tried to explain but Z wasn't interested in excuses. He was pissed. He told us we had to get out and stop looking for answers, or it was only going to get worse. He said "[...]." He wouldn't elaborate, again giving us that "the less you know, the better" spiel.

He said our main concern was to[..>]. We asked what he was going to do to our town and the people who lived there, but he just shook his head. We asked how he'd found us, and he said the internet is a public forum. He said maybe this nosleep story is a good thing, since it allows them to keep tabs on us and decide when to act. But he also mentioned, with an ominous tone, that he's not the only one reading.

Z said he's changed his email address, due to all the messages from you guys (we think that's hilarious). He won't trust us with the new one, but told us to keep posting. I don't know why he cares. I can only imagine Alan is important to this creature or something, and thus important to Z's organization. Maybe I am, too, but I doubt it. I believe I was just caught in the crossfire - though maybe that's wishful thinking. I won't leave Alan though, so don't even suggest it. He's all I have.

Okay, on to the important stuff. Z, are you reading? This is for you.

Last night I woke up from a horrible nightmare. It was the kind where you can't move your legs, like you're walking through molasses, and something pale was following me. I kept getting glimpses of it. I don't want to think about it.

I lay in bed, suddenly wide awake, and tried to figure out what had woken me. I'd snapped into consciousness with a start, but I didn't think my dream had triggered it. Every muscle in my body was tense and I listened hard for a long time, but there was no sound besides Alan's deep breathing from the next bed.

The shadows were so deep I could only see vague shapes, but something in me told me not to reach out for the light - like when you're a kid, and you're convinced that if you just lay still, the monster won't know you're there.

I was a child again, terrified of the dark. I don't know how long I laid there, tense, surrounded by blackness, jumping at every creak and groan of the settling building. Once or twice I thought I heard movement from out in the hallway, but brushed it off and tried, really tried, to fall back asleep.

As dawn crept in between the slats of the blinds across our window and the room lost its deep darkness, my eyes started to get heavy.

Smiling, I allowed myself to sink into the sheets and let sleep take me again. It was when I was teetering on that edge, just before unconsciousness, that I finally heard what I'd been listening for.

The doorknob on the door to the room rattled. Quietly, so quietly I almost ignored it at first. Like someone outside was gently testing to see if it was locked. The sound stopped, but my eyes were wide open again. Slowly, I sat up in bed and stared toward the door.

It immediately happened again, much louder this time, with much more force behind it. My gasp woke Alan, who I shushed and told to listen. There was silence for a long moment.

Thump, rattle rattle, thump thump thump

It sounded like someone was trying to force the door open with their shoulder. I climbed into Alan's bed and we huddled there in silence as the rattling and thumping continued for a good two or three minutes. It felt much longer. A scratching sound took its place after a bit, soft and slow, almost mournful.

Then, as abruptly as it began, it stopped. We heard the sound of shuffling footsteps retreat from the door, awkward and uneven - dragging on one step, thudding against the floor on the next. When the sound was gone, Alan got up to look through the peephole. No one was there, so he opened the door.

We found a single earring laying on the ground right outside the door, like a threat. Also, our room number was gone. Taken. Just four little holes in the cheap wood.

Alan picked up the earring and photographed it "for posterity." Here's that picture. Pretty boring, but maybe you want to see.

I didn't need to wonder who's earring it was. I'd seen it decorating her upper cartilage since she'd gotten the piercing at thirteen years old. The squiggly connector latch and faded silver were unmistakable.

The earring belonged to Jess.

As I sat there dealing with that, just staring at the earring, wondering what it meant, Lisa's phone buzzed. Alan is still carrying it around, half out of sentimentality, half hoping he can give it back to her soon. The message was from an unknown number.

UNKNOWN

```
Run run rhn as fast aa you can

It is a kost xayse

Come home.
```

We're leaving George. We switched motels. It feels like we're running now, and I don't know how long the chase will last. We're on our way to Seattle.

Z, if you have answers, if you can help us in any way, please find us.

Part 6

Dear Alan and Elizabeth

You left Lisa's phonr in a dumpster outsid e of Ellensburg. Thank you for this. She has been missing it. I should say, dhe **was*8 missing it. Oiry it is to0 late to give it back to her. Down low too slow.

We are using it tow write this. I am using it to write this. I will post it so you can find it. Desperation has driven us to thsi extent. But we habe things we need to discuss. Many important things theat wa=eigh every day on our mind. Why are you avoiding me? Are you scared? Do not be svared. Harming you is far from my thoughts.

Come back with me. Come home with us. Everyone misses you. Everyone is worried aboit you.. Z is a danger and a liar.

`[...} throat.`

[rudesorryy]

`[a..{y`

For you, Elizabeth - Zzx will never look at youthat way again. We will protect her, Alan, as Z failed to protect Lisa. let her slip away, so sad. She loved her life with us, Alan, more than she loved you. , . Shediedhappy

I have heard you say the words, Alan, "don't knock it until you try it." You have tried to live like I do, but you do not remember. And now you reject it. Is this not the same thing? Live by your own advice, Alan.I promise, you enjoyed it immedsely. I enjoy it immensely. **This life is everythung I wanted**9. You will will neverforget. You will smile forever.

IWe wait for you in the damp and darkness. gods you loved it here. Remmeber? All you have to do is call.

I only want to mke you havpy. i have never wantd something so badly in my entire life.

I love you, Alan and Elixabethm Dean and Samantha.

FHiEnLdP me,sskscl;a PPPPPPLEEEEEEEEEEEEASEiamstillherelizzy kjdwc . . .wewlke lwqejjejedlc FIXTHIS

-Jessica

EDIT:

Alan here. Seriously, it's Alan. We still have our laptops with us. I was alerted to this post only when someone commented on it.

We did throw away Lisa's phone in Ellensburg. Lizzy convinced me to. It's plausible someone could have found it. Whether or not it's Jess is beyond me.

I can't comment on this letter right now. I just wanted to let you know we're still alive.

Part 7

I'm fucked. I am so, so fucked.

It's been two weeks since the last post. I apologize, but we had to pawn our laptops for some quick cash. Neither of us have phones anymore.

This is Liz by the way. I'm using Alan's account to avoid confusion.

After Jessica posted her little love note, Alan and I left Seattle, knowing someone would show up there next, looking for us. And I've learned my lesson, so no, I'm not telling you where I am.

Alan was really quiet during the drive, thinking. But whereas before, when we would discuss every little thing going through our heads, he wouldn't tell me anything. He'd just shrug and say he was at a loss for any answers.

Everything we've done so far seems to be wrong. I think he was exhausted and really depressed about Lisa. The note mentioned her death and he'd been trying to hold out hope.

He seemed a bit better over dinner the next night, a bit more normal once we'd checked into a hotel and things seemed less frantic. He cracked a couple jokes and wanted to watch X-Files. I started to feel better about all of this..

A week passed, totally quiet, totally normal. No weird texts or nightmares or mold. We did a bit of sightseeing. It felt really good to get out of that hotel room - both of us were getting cabin fever. It was nice, for a couple days, not to flinch every time there was a knock at the door. No sign of monsters. Alan got his color back and the circles faded from under my eyes.

Our only issue was that we were running really low on money. So, like I mentioned, we pawned our laptops and I got a job at a diner. I thought maybe we could make this city a permanent home. Alan wasn't sure about that, but I was trying desperately to look on the bright side. It didn't make sense that we had been followed here - we had no way of being tracked. We were safe, and I was trying to convince him of that.

Then, one night, things started to go wrong again. We'd gone out to dinner across town, and by the time we'd made our way back to the hotel it was well past midnight. I was pretty drunk, so Alan supported me as we stumbled inside and made our way up to our room. I blindly staggered into the darkness and fell face-first on the bed. It took me a long moment to realize Alan hadn't followed me inside.

He was standing in the doorway, staring down at something in his hand that he'd picked up. He told me it had been hung across the door handle, and he'd noticed it as soon as he'd slid the key into the lock. I got up to look, too, and he kept me at an arm's length. But I saw what he was holding: a long chunk of blond hair, the exact color as Jess's. It looked as though it had been torn out by the roots, a few chunks of flesh dangling from certain strands, stained in dried blood. Wrapped around it was a thin silver chain with a diamond pendant. Alan recognized the necklace as one he'd gotten for Lisa back when they'd first started dating.

I couldn't quite process what I was seeing, but I knew something was wrong with Alan. It was like he'd drawn up into himself. His eyes were kind of distant and cloudy, and he looked like he'd just come down with a terrible cold - pasty white skin, kind of sweating, hunched over this macabre little present.

I was crying in thirty seconds, drunkenly demanding that he throw it away - "Why the fuck are you touching it?? It could be infected!" He wouldn't answer, fingering the pendant like it was the heart of the goddamn ocean. I got to screaming so loud that the manager came up to ask what the fuss was. That was the only thing that finally snapped Alan out of his idiocy. He tossed the hair out our fifth story window, but kept the necklace. Then he laid down in bed and went to sleep.

He ignored me the rest of the night and the following morning. He was up and having coffee when I got out of the shower to dress for work. I said bye to him on my way out the door, but he didn't reply. I think he was still holding that necklace. His last piece of Lisa, I guess.

When I returned from work it was pretty late. The diner is understaffed so, as the newbie, I was roped into working a double. Not that I'm complaining - the pay is good and the tips are great. Alan was already sleeping, or pretending to, by the time I came in. Wanting to cry, I climbed into my bed and fell asleep.

I woke up to something shuffling across the room. It was very dark, as the heavy curtains were pulled across the windows. Careful not to make much noise, I looked over to Alan's bed, where he was squirming around under the covers. At first I thought I was witness to some bad nightmare, but then he kicked off his comforter and I saw that his eyes were wide open.

How do I explain this? It looked like he was trying to stand up, but had lost all concept of how to control his arms and legs. He laid on his

back, pushing his torso up with his shoulder blades, his arms splayed at strange angles. I heard his joints pop as he tried to rotate his knee down toward the bed, a physical impossibility, and stifled a gasp. His head jerked around to look over at me.

A million thoughts went through my head - what if he was having some kind of seizure? Should I call an ambulance? Should I help? But self-preservation and experience kept me where I was.

Hiding under my covers, I watched him gain his feet quickly once I'd made a sound. He kind of slithered off the bed and stood with his back to me, craning his head around to look over his shoulder. I watched his fingers working stiffly, watched him rotate his wrists. Something dangled from one hand, catching the light - Lisa's diamond necklace. He was still holding it.

Alan took three steps backwards, towards my bed, then quickly turned around to face me. I almost jumped, but stiffened and kept pretending to sleep.

He watched me for a while, grinning widely. Then, abruptly, he took four steps backwards towards the window. Turning, he forced it open about a foot, looked toward me again and bent backwards, sliding his head between it and the sill. Then he started to lower himself backwards out the window.

I watched in horror as Alan curved at an obscene angle and his upper body disappeared outside beneath the ledge. His legs started to slide through next, and I jumped up to try to grab him. We were five stories up. Even he survived such a fall, he'd be seriously injured.

Before I was halfway to the window, his legs failed to hold his weight and the rest of him slipped through. I heard the whoosh as his body fell and the sickening crack as he hit the pavement head first. You see why I've been putting off writing about it.

Holding my breath, I looked out the window, down to where I was sure Alan was laying dead. He was there, and there was blood, but almost immediately he started to stir, pushing himself off the ground with broken fingers, climbing onto a leg snapped at the shin, brushing concrete off his head which was cracked and streaming blood. He looked up to me in the window, slowly, and gurgled something incomprehensible. He was grinning like mad. In his right hand he still clutched the necklace.

After a long moment, he shuffled off down the road, dragging his broken leg, his shoulders uneven and slumped.

I'm not under any illusions about what happened here. My Alan is dead, replaced with something that, against all odds, found us again. Something that looks like him but can never pretend to *be* him. It knows it, too. It's not even trying to hide anymore. And it's after me.

I moved again, but I know it's only a matter of time. In any case, right now I'm still alive. Z, anyone from Z's organization, please help me. I'm alone and I'm running out of options and sanity. Nothing feels real anymore. I can't sleep.

~~But I'm still alive, goddammit.~~

//: GNITIAW*neeb ev?ahe=+w

{S}mile

by nicmccool

Runner Up - Best Multi-Part Story of 2014

{A}lzheimer's

“Dad?” I nudge his shoulder, trying to get his attention. “Dad, can you finish what you were saying?”

He turns back from the window, glassy eyed like the fogged up pane of his hospital room. He stares at me for a long second trying to remember who I am then a tiny upturn at the corner of his mouth. “They have good pie here,” he says.

His voice breaks my heart. It’s the same voice that read to me before bed, casting me off into an ocean of sleep with his thick baritone as my guide. It’s the same smooth sound that made breakups and booboos all better as a kid; the same voice that toasted me at my wedding. “I know, dad. They have good pie.” The hospital doesn’t actually serve pie. I place a hand on his arm; his forearms are still thick ropes of muscle. “Can you remember what you were telling me?”

“Junior?” His eyes light up, like someone deep inside the black pupils lit the faintest of lanterns. “Junior, how long have you –“

“I’ve been here awhile, dad. We’ve been talking.” I smile. “You were telling me about Uncle Jon.”

A shadow shades his eyes as deep wrinkled brows dip downward. “Why are we talking about that bastard?”

“You were telling me what happened. You were telling me why you two don’t talk anymore.”

He shakes his head. Frustration. I’m losing him again.

“The diner, dad. You were telling me about the diner. Something about –“

“Every one of them,” he says. He pulls his arm away and wipes a dry forehead with the back of his hospital gown. The fog is creeping back into his eyes. “Laying brick ain’t for the weak.” His hand goes to his shoulder massaging muscles that aren’t really sore.

He’s almost gone, I think. “Dad, the diner?” I try to guide him back.

The thick southern drawl of his youth surfaces as he talks, “12 hour days, e’ryday. You know that?” I nod, not really understanding. “And we only got paid for eight. But it was enough; plenty in fact.”

“Did you work with Jon back then?” I ask, steering him back.

“You hear that, Jon? This boy’s askin’ if you worked with me!” He’s talking over his shoulder to an empty hospital corner. “The only thing you ever lifted was a fork to your damn mouth.” He laughs then frowns as a memory slips through.

He’s almost gone again. “What happened at the diner? Why did you and Uncle Jon stop talking that day?” I try to turn his shoulders back towards me, but he’s still so strong.

He finally turns on his own accord, his head lagging a moment behind still staring at something only he can see. “Listen pal,” he says in a less than cordial tone. “You might wanna keep them hands off me.”

I’ve lost him. “Dad?”

The lantern is back in his eyes, faint and distant, but then puffed out by the fog. “They got any pie today, Jon?”

He’s talking to me, but looking through me at the same time. “No, not today,” I say. I reach down and gather my bag and my phone. I’ve got two missed calls from my wife. I’m already late. “I’m going to go, dad. I’ve got dinner plans at home.” He’s looking back out the window ignoring me. I stand, put on my coat, and walk towards the door. “You want me to say anything to Jon? He’s visiting. I haven’t seen him in years –“

“Why’d you do it?”

I stop, hand on the doorknob. “You want me to ask him –“

He's staring at me, dark lucidity glowing from his brown eyes. "All those people, Jon. Why?"

I take a few steps towards him. "Dad, I'm not –"

"Were you mad 'cause they teased you?" His hands are clenched into fists. "They teased everybody!" He's yelling now, anger in his voice I've never heard before. "Maybe if you didn't make it so easy on them; always eatin' and never workin'. Maybe if you tried to put in one good day of honest work!"

I can hear the nurses hurrying down the hall. "Dad, what happened? What did Uncle Jon do?"

He bares his teeth, spitting the words at me. "But, poison?! You weren't even man enough to stand up up to 'em face to face, you coward!" The nurses are there now, restraining him, pushing him back into his chair. He's still so strong but the memories seem to suck all that energy from him, draining him of life. "You coward," he yells again, but the voice is distant, like he's forgotten why he's saying those words. "Coward," he whispers into the window.

The nurses look at me accusingly as they retreat from the room. "Dad?" I cross the room, kneel down, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Dad, what happened?"

He turns towards me; his eyes are the same clarity as the fogged glass behind him. "They have good pie here," he says. His eyes water and he turns back around. He's gone.

I kiss his forehead and leave the building. As I'm walking to the car I check my voicemail. "You're late," my wife says. "Your uncle's here early. He brought pie."

{B}reak-in

There's blood trickling from his nose; a slow steady stream that gets wiped across his left check and diluted with the tears that are now flowing freely from a blackening eye. A crimson droplet joins a puddle of partially dried blood soaking into the thick Persian rug below his knees at the bottom of the stairs.

"Do you have a family," I ask.

He doesn't say anything, but his head dips answering for him.

"I'm assuming that's a yes?"

A soft whimper. More tears.

I sit down on the stairs, my feet resting on the landing, and prop my elbows on my knees. I point the gun at his head. The storm is picking up outside. Rain is pouring in through the front room's broken window. The gun's heavier than I expected. It holds a weight more than just its metal.

"There's no clicky thing on this gun," I say. "Are they all like that?"

No answer.

"In the movies the guy always pulls that thing on the top back with his thumb. That's not on this one." I inspect the gun, turning it over in my hands.

He wipes another stream of snot and blood across his cheek with the back of a shaking hand.

"Hey," I say and tap the top of his head with the gun. He flinches. "What's your name?"

He mumbles something.

"Say again?" I ask and press the tip of the gun under his chin and lift his head. His eyes are squeezed shut.

"Derek," he whispers. His top lip is split. He grimaces when he talks and I can see blood on his teeth.

"Derek what?" I ask.

"Vassar," he says and tries to move his chin away from the barrel. I push it into the soft spot under his jaw.

"Vassar? Why is that name familiar?" I remove the gun and scratch the side of my head as I think. "Your dad John by any chance?"

Fresh tears spill from the closed eyes.

"No shit?" I say. "He's a good guy. I think I still have his shovel. Let him know when you see him, okay?"

Derek nods. His shoulders relax a little. The sobbing quiets. I place a hand on the banister avoiding the blood and pull myself up. There are sirens now in the distance.

"You're lucky these stairs are carpeted," I say. "Your fall could've been way worse." I laugh and pat him on the shoulder. He doesn't flinch this time.

I stand behind him and look out the broken window. Thunder cracks as Derek tries to say something. The sky wears a grey mask. He repeats himself, but the sirens are close enough to drown him out. Red and blue lights fill the room.

In a brief moment of silence he whispers, "I didn't know you were home."

"But, I was," I say looking out the window.

Lightening flashes illuminating the street outside. The Vassar's front porch light is on. A winter wreath hangs from their door. "I'm sorry," Derek says.

I turn and look at him. He's nearly doubled over on his knees, sobs shake his entire body.

“I’m not,” I say and pull the trigger.

{C}remation

I come from a small town where the only jobs for freshly graduated college kids stupid enough to return home are fast food and Walmart, so I practically peed myself when Anita called me out of the blue and offered me an internship. It's not the most ideal job, and it's something I have to lie about when I talk to other people or I get a lot of really stupid questions -- "Does it smell in there, Cassie?", "Do you ever, *you know*, check out peoples' wangs?", "Are you scared?"-- but it's a weekly paycheck and I have the chance to stay on after a year.

First off, I've got two brothers so I've pretty much seen it all. Steven used to bring home deer and rabbits, and skin them right outside my bedroom window. Chad, he was normal, but he'd always show up with some freak injury that he'd be more than happy to shove in my face while I was trying to eat my Cap'n Crunch. I can safely say I was a already fairly morbid midwestern girl far before I started working at Reynolds Funeral Home.

And secondly, you can't just turn down an offer to work in a funeral home. Forget all the dead bodies stuff, being a mort tech is a *cushy* job. I mean, that's why they always keep it in the family! I think I work about twenty total hours a week, get paid for forty, and spend all my free time in the upstairs lounge on one of the pastel rose couches reading my kindle and avoiding Centaur, Anita's mastiff with a affinity for humping my hip. Plus, did I say I may get to stay on in a year? I mean, that's like a *life* gig; the golden ticket and all those other corny cliches. So, when weird things happen in a mortuary you tend to ignore them, because the perks are good.

That's normal, right?

Okay, so a few days ago I got called in to prep two bodies; a mother and son poisoning, which as sad as it seems is a pretty big cash cow for funeral homes. We'll take nice safe heart attacks and poisonings any day of the week over gun shots and car wrecks. There's no physical reconstruction, maybe a little around the mouth if there happened to be a large amount of bile or resuscitation efforts, but it's way better than trying to jigsaw puzzle somebody's face back together. And as in any business two is always better than one.

We're a small funeral home, you could almost call us mom and pop, except Anita's husband died a few weeks ago, so I guess we're a mom and random girl business. We don't have a whole lot of money for sub freezes and heavy duty storage like you see on tv with the stacked drawers and stuff. We've got one positive temp storage in the basement with an old Mopec table, and three gurneys for overflow. The door to storage is one of those big steel insulated ones that seals when it's shut, so when you latch it down you can't hear a thing on the other side. Which is why the noise really freaked me out.

I was washing down the boy, he smelled like strawberries and stomach acid, and I was lost in thought about some teen romance I was reading when I heard a shuffling sound. I said the storage was sealed shut, right? Like, no sound? Because, that's what I was used to and when I heard it, let's just say I jumped *over* the table like I was an Olympic freakin' high jumper.

"What the fuck?!" I screamed. Not the most eloquent I admit, but it got the point across. "Anita, are you messing with me?"

She wasn't, I mean, she never had in the past and she wasn't the type to randomly prank an employee surrounded by dead bodies. She's like a grown up Wednesday Addam's, but with less personality. I scanned the room slowly, looking at the empty corners first, then counted all the tools on the instrument cart. One saw? Check. Two bone cutters? Check. Two flush retractors? Check. One really big pair of scissors? Nope.

"Seriously?!" I screamed. It came out much louder than I was expecting in the small room and I raised my hands to block my ears. In my right hand the scissors came extremely close to stabbing me in the temple. "Oh," I said to no one. I must have grabbed them off the cart when I hurdled the boy.

The boy.

I raised the scissors up in what I thought was an intimidating pose. "Don't be moving. Don't be moving. Don't be moving…," I chanted in my head; a prayer to a god or gods or whatever was enjoying this shit-show. "Please, please don't be moving." My eyes cut from the instrument table to the grossing station along one wall, to the sealed concrete floor that concaved into a drain under the table, and then up the table to two tiny feet that shone a waxy pink in the harsh overhead lights. The toes moved. "They didn't move, Cassie. You just blinked." I stared at them for thirty seconds, wanting them not to move, but somehow hoping they would. They didn't and I traced up the rest of the body with my eyes. "Definitely dead," I thought.

And then something launched itself against the outside of the door.

I screamed. Of course I screamed. I screamed so loud I looked over to see if the woman on the gurney would sit up and tell me to keep it down because she was trying to sleep. The scissors clanged to the floor. They weren't just dropped, they were propelled against the steel door with all the force I, the person directly referenced in the insult "you throw like a girl" because I *am* that girl, could muster. I squatted down and covered my head, because I heard somewhere that's what you do when everything goes freakin' bonkers, and kept screaming.

On my third pause for air I realized that everything was dead quiet again. “Dead quiet? Nice one, Cassie,” I thought and pulled myself up off the floor. My hands brushed the fingertips of the boy on the table and I was half tempted to either hold his hand for comfort or crouch back down and start screaming again until the Army, or Navy, or freakin’ Marines blasted through that door to rescue me. “Daddy was a Marine,” I thought.

Fuck.

What would my dad think of his only daughter, crouched on the floor of an over-sized refrigerator, scared of some random noises outside? The trembling in my arms slowed, my lip stopped quivering. “It’s probably just Anita moving in a new table,” I thought. “Or maybe they’re replacing the propane for the cremator.” The latter was probably true. We hadn’t gotten new propane in months, so we were due for a refill. “Just poke your head out, Cassie,” I said to myself and the two cold bodies behind me. “Just poke your head out and see.”

My fingers grasped the metal latch and pulled up. Stuck.

“Fuck this, I’m done,” I said as panic started to wash over me. And then, in some rational part of my brain my dad said, “Push down, Cassandra.” I was calm again. “Duh,” I thought and pushed the latch down. The door opened outward with a soft release of air.

The basement of the funeral home goes the full length of the building, but the building itself is not that big, so when standing at the partially open door of cold storage and looking out one can see the big gaping metal mouth of the industrial furnace the house was built around forty years ago. Brickwork lines the outside of the furnace marred black from residual blow-back after years of “cooks”. A rack of rollers stand on metal stilts and angle into the furnace’s mouth like a long, silver ridged tongue. Today the rollers were empty, but the mouth was open. Fire licked up on the inside of the furnace casting the entire side of the building in a blue-red strobe. A black shadow inside the mouth twitched and thrashed in the flames.

Twitched and thrashed.

I thought I was blinking again, I thought my eyes were lying, so I stared. My head poking out from behind the clean steel door looking across floors grooved by years of gurneys into the wide mouth of a furnace where a black object morphed to ashes and twitched. I stared until the light from the flames hurt my eyes and left rose blooms of red on the backs of my lids when they were closed. I blinked out what I thought I saw, re-saw the image, and tried to blink it out again. “Definitely twitching,” I thought. “Maybe it’s just a cross-breeze coming down through the chimney -”

And then it screamed.

A howling painful yell ripped from the throat of whatever burned in that fire. A scream of seizure and ecstasy. A scream both primal and knowledgeable enough to know that this sound was the last imprint it would leave on the world. A scream that gurgled out with the boiling blood of its throat until nothing was left but the soft whimpering pleas of the remaining dust.

I slammed the metal door behind me and latched it shut. I slid to the floor and tucked my head between my knees and covered my head. I stayed in that position for what seemed like hours but could have been minutes when the Marines finally came knocking at the door.

“Cassie?” the Marine who sounded an awful lot like Anita Reynolds said from outside the door. “Cassie are you almost done with the wash down?”

“Almost,” I found myself replying. “Almost. Give me another few minutes.”

“Okay,” the voice said, and then it was gone.

I found myself standing, picking the scissors up off the floor, and putting them back on the instrument table. I thumbed down the switch on the shower head. “That wasn’t really a scream,” I said to the dead in the room. “I mean, it was definitely *not* a scream, right?” I took their silence as affirmation. I went back to washing the boy and his mother and never mentioned what I saw or heard.

When weird things happen at work in a mortuary you tend to ignore them, because the perks are good.

{D}oghouse

It was a sea of lilies and roses expanding from the center of a freshly tilled garden. I floated above them, my flannel pajamas flapping in the wind. The flowers expanded out from the center then collapsed back in like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Out then in. Out then in. Out then… they burned from a black mass in the center. Wilting petals puffed off plumes of dying smoke. The roses turned black from invisible flames while the white lilies morphed to a bruised shade of purple and twisted around the thorned stems choking the dying buds. The black mass in the center seized violently; it rolled back and forth crushing the flowers on either side. Two thick black stems shot out from each side of its body like a half-bred spider. The black crust cracked. Blood-drenched tufts of brown hair pushed through the breaks while a head formed at the top. A long snout covered in the black crust raised itself towards me. Below the snout a mouth opened showing rows of broken teeth. The thing sucked in a tidal wave of air drawing me in. I fought the wind, but felt myself floating into its gaping maw. And then a click in its throat as the pressure changed. Lungs, wheezing and dry, expelled rotten meat air in a violent and sorrowful…

Howl.

A warm thin arm draped over me.

Howl.

The arm retreats towards my back, the hand lingering on my shoulder.

Howl.

The hand is shaking my shoulder now, gently rocking me back and forth. Out and in.

Howl.

Words whisper across the back of my neck. Breath mixed with a faint floral fragrance waft over my shoulder.

Howl.

"John." More flowers; more gentle rocking.

Howl.

"John, wake up."

My eyes flicker. I'm tugged from a dream (a memory?). Consciousness seeps in through the cracks of my reality.

"John," she says again. Her nose is nestled in the back of my hair, her arm is still shaking me awake. "John, the dog."

The black mass shakes off its crust. Four legs, mangled and broken, sway and buckle as it tries to stand. A long snout on a crooked head covered in wrinkles tilts knowingly at me…

I'm awake. My eyes flutter open. The moon is bright through pulled curtains. It silhouettes the high back chair propped against the wall where Greta likes to read. It casts light down on the pile of gym shoes I refuse to put away, the guitar I pretend to play, and the little girl standing at the side of my bed.

Howl.

"John! The dog," the voice behind me reminds.

The little girl, barely tall enough to look over the edge of the mattress, stares at me through eyes that are identical to her mother's. "What is it, sweetheart?" I say. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"Wrinkles wants to come inside, daddy," she says and points to the open window.

Greta's awake now and lifts her head from the pillow. She places a hand on Becky's cheek. "Oh, honey. You know Wrinkles isn't outside –"

"But he is!" cries the little girl. "He is! Daddy left him out there today."

I sigh and sit up. Becky's three and weighs about as much as the doll she drags around behind her, so when she climbs up into my lap and works her way into the bend of my arm she's as light and natural as the football I carried for all those years. I use my free hand to push the

long brown hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. She looks so much like her mother. Her older brother looks so much like me. I smile.

Howl.

"See, daddy?" She whines. "Wrinkles is still out there."

I put her down and cross the room to the window. The backyard is bright in the full moon. I look out passed the garden and the doghouse, over our privacy fence, and scan the neighbors' yards. "Maybe it's the Reynolds' dog Centipede or Centimeter or –"

"Centaur," Becky corrects. "And no, daddy. Centaur's big, he barks like this –" she makes a deep woofing sound. She smiles. "Wrinkles is not as big. He barks like this –" she howls.

Howl.

The smiles on both our faces shrink. I kneel in front of Becky and take both her shoulders in my hands. "Sweetheart, that's not Wrinkles." She pouts. "But, daddy will go out and see who it is, okay?" She nods. "Greta, can you take her back to bed, please?"

"Of course," she says and pulls on a robe. She leads Becky away, two nearly identical clones walking hand in hand down the hall.

I slip on a pair of shoes, pull a t-shirt on over my flannel pants, and trot down the stairs. Underneath the kitchen sink I grab a flashlight, check that it's still working and open the back door. The dog door flaps open and shut, and sadness hits me unexpectedly. I shake it off and pull the door closed behind me.

Late night dew has already settled on the grass. My canvas shoes soak in the moisture and I can feel the coldness on my toes. To my right the garden is empty, its flowers trimmed down before the winter's months. There's a lump of dirt bulging on the back side. Fresh dirt. I shine the flashlight's weak beam on the dirt and trace it down the side to a deep hole. A deep empty hole in the middle of my garden where we buried –

"John, what is it?" Greta says from behind me.

I spin on a heel and shine the flashlight in her face. "Where's Becky?" I ask.

"She's in her room," she says shielding her eyes from the light. "Up there." She points to the window overlooking the backyard. The light's on in her room. Becky waves. I aim the flashlight at the ground and wave back. "She cannot come out here," I whisper.

"What is it? What happened?" Greta's voice is rising with each word.

"Shh…" I say. "I think… I think something dug up the garden." I point the flashlight at the mound of fresh dirt. Greta gasps. "It's not a big deal. Probably just an animal or something. Maybe a neighbor's dog."

"But, John, Becky cannot see this! What will we tell her? What do we tell Derek when he gets home? They'll be traumatized!"

"I know, I'll get my shovel back from that new guy across the street and fill it up tomorrow. She won't see anything." I put my arm around her shoulder and lead her back to the house. She's shivering.

"But, what about Wrinkles. Was he in there?"

"No, whatever dug the hole probably took him away. I'll look around the house tomorrow and see –"

Howl.

My blood goes cold. The howl came from right behind me; from in my yard. I push Greta towards the door and spin around. The flashlight shakes in my hand as I pan across the yard. There's no movement in the dark corners of the fences. Nothing in the grass. The hole in the garden is still just an empty hole in the garden, and the empty doghouse is still just a –

The doghouse pitches to the left. The painted "Wrinkles" sign sways on a bent nail. I try to shine my light into the dark entrance, but I'm too far away and the batteries are too weak.

"What are you doing?!" Greta asks as I walk towards the squat blue house. The red paint of its roof reflects the moon.

"Shhh…" I say, looking back at her with a finger to my lips. I'm ten feet away now. I lean over, trying to get a better view. Five feet away the dark of the doghouse's insides start to give way to the light. Three feet. I'm crouching now, leaning forward with my arm outstretched; the flashlight shaking violently in my hand, its light fading in and out. Two feet. I'm on my hands and knees leaning forward into the hole.

One foot.

The window opens upstairs and Becky leans out. “It’s okay, Daddy,” she says. “Wrinkles is asleep in my bed.”

Her light blinks out. The backyard is silent, even the air seems to stop moving.

Panic. I turn to run inside, Becky's name screaming out of my mouth, but before I can get to my feet a hand reaches out from inside the doghouse and grabs my wrist.

“Shhh…,” it says. “You’ll wake the baby.”

{E}zekiel

“A reading from the book of Matthew, chapter six.”

The congregation shuffles in their pews pulling out bibles to follow along. Ian Mcleritin cups a hand to his ear and lets out a hoarse, “Huh?”

Sixth time this mass, Ian, I think. “Matthew, Mr. Mcleritin. The book of Matthew. Chapter six.”

He nods and thumbs through the pages. I clear my throat, adjust the bendable microphone on the dark stained oak pulpit, and begin. “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” There are a few Amen’s, a handful of head nods, and one woman in the back, Mrs. Yerner probably, lifts a heavy hand in the air and voices a warbling “Halleluiah”.

St. Paul’s is a medium sized parish with a less than medium sized turnout each week, but with the past few weeks’ unfortunate events it seems more and more people are showing up for mass. I dial up the gospel and homily on purpose. Nothing wrong with razing a little hell, I like to say.

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life,” I continue. My voice is full and echoes off the marble columns. No traces of the cancer here, folks. A pack a day for thirty-seven years ain’t nothing if you pray all the time, I like to say. “What you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

The double doors at the back of the church swing open. An early winter sunrise glares in from the outside followed by a gust of cool wind. A wide-brim floral hat flies off the head of someone in a rear pew and rolls down the center aisle. The congregation turns to look at the black shape silhouetted by a cloudless sky that stands unmoving in the center of the archway. It walks forward, the shadows dripping away as it – as he – stops beneath a stained glass-encased light revealing a normal looking man in jeans and a blue oxford. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows. He pauses under the light, ignores the people in the pews and stares directly at me. The corners of his eyes wrinkle as a smile appears on his face. He nods his head as if to say, “Please continue,” and then takes a seat in the back pew while two ushers hurry to close the doors.

I clear my throat again. The congregation takes the cue and turns back to face me. Nothing exciting about a late entrance, I like to say. “Look at the birds of the air,” I read, pointing towards the heavens for emphasis. “They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” I look up from the ornate bible. More nodding heads. The newcomer seems to have moved up a pew. He’s sitting next to the Marshall family now; maybe he knows them. *Odd*, I think.

I look back down to the bible, find my spot, and read, “And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?” I add a little embellishment at the last part, holding onto the “span of life” for emphasis. Gotta bait the fish if you want to fry, I like to say. I look up expecting to see Mrs. Yerner testifying but she’s sitting on her hands. A grey hue mottles her dark brown skin. Next to her the newcomer sits with his legs crossed and an arm around the back of the pew behind the large woman. He stares directly at me with that same frozen smile.

I feel myself sweating under my vestments. “And … and …” I’m struggling to find my spot. Someone coughs in a near silent church. “And why are you anxious about clothing?” I read. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin;” I quickly memorize the last line and look up from the pulpit. “Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory –“

My mouth goes dry. I struggle to swallow. The newcomer has moved up two more pews. He’s six rows away from me and I can *feel* his stare. The smile doesn’t waver; in fact it *grows* as I look out at him. He doesn’t blink. He doesn’t move. He’s like a blonde statue just staring at me with strange eyes. What is it about his eyes?

There’s another cough from the back of the church. The ushers are standing by the door with their heads tilted, curious as to why I’m not talking. How long have I been silent? I clear my throat again and try to remember where I was. “Even Solomon…” I start, but the rest is blank. I quickly look down and find the verse. “Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these,” I blurt out in rapid speech. I look up and scan the church. He’s gone!

No, wait! He’s moved up again. One more row, but this time he’s on the other side of the aisle. How did he move so fast?!

There’s visible sweat dripping off my brow and landing on the thin pages beneath shaking hands. A soft rattle is forming in my lungs. I can feel my knees wanting to unhinge. I don’t want to look down, but I have to finish this gospel. I can recite the entire homily from memory, I’ll never have to look away, I just have to get through these last few verses!

A trembling finger marks the line where I left off. “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?” I look up. He’s a pew closer. He sits between Ms Reynolds and Junior Mackey now. “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, `What shall we eat?' or`What shall we drink?' or `What shall we wear?' For the

Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all." He's on the other side of the aisle one pew closer. Dan Lafferty is pulling his toddler away from the newcomer. His wife is crying. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well," I read quickly.

"Huh?" Mr. Mcleritin says.

I look to the first pew and my heart stops. The newcomer sits directly in front me, the same smile carved into an angular face. The smile doesn't reach his eyes anymore; they burn with a strange intensity that sets his face in a vibrating haze, like looking down asphalt in a heat wave. Mr. Mcleritin sits next to him a hand cupped to his ear.

I forego repeating myself and read the last verse as fast as possible, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day!" I scream. And he's there. There, right in front of me. Large hands rest on the top of the pulpit. Well-manicured nails tap the leather binding on the book. I begin to protest in mock bravery, to question how this man, this *stranger*, could have the audacity to interrupt my sermon when I'm transfixed by his eyes. They're two different colors; one a cold blue like a frosted lake, and the other a bright, nearly transparent, brown that's ringed with a burning red line. "I… I…" I start but the man's smile grows. It grows until it reaches proportions impossible to conceive; distorted facial features that widen on ends and collapse back on themselves like a melting wax figure propped up in front of a fan. His smile grows until rows of filed teeth clamp in an alligator smile and a split tongue darts through gaps. It grows until I'm too afraid to keep looking and yet far too afraid to look away.

He smiles while the voice seeps through thin lips pulled back on crimson gums. "And in the fire was what looked like four living creatures," he whispers. "In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings." He reaches out and grabs my shoulders, pulling me over the pulpit to him. "Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands." He turns my head so he could talk into my ear. I can feel his teeth brushing against my skin. "All four of them had faces and wings, and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved." He lets me go and I fall backwards, barely keeping my feet. His head tilts, as if he's studying me, and then in a soft voice he says, "You should have read that one, padre."

The cough comes with such sudden violence that I find myself doubled over, hands on my knees. Thick phlegm chokes my lungs and catches in my throat. My face goes purple as my oxygen starved brain turns my surroundings to white. I place a hand over my mouth and wretch. Two altar boys rush over and move me to a chair. Slowly the cough subsides, my lungs fill back up with air, and my vision returns. I look out into the congregation where everyone sits wide-eyed and panicked, but no one moves.

The newcomer is gone.

I go to stand, pressing down on my knees to steady myself and see blood on my robe. I look around but see no wounds, and then one of the altar boys motions to my mouth and I wipe it with the back of my hand. The hand comes away shiny red. I cough again.

A thick rattle forms in my lungs, a black mass making itself known, and I know that praying won't help me, won't help *anyone*, ever again.

"No, no, no, man. That's nothing. You want gross, man, I'll tell you gross." He takes a long drink from his beer. He's in the double digits now. *I'm going to have to drive him home*, I think. If that's the case maybe *I* should stop drinking.

"Another one, Sammy," I say to the bartender raising a half-empty pint glass. "If I'm gonna have to listen to this asshole tell stories, I might as well be drunk."

Max winks at me, sways in his seat, and then takes another gulp from his beer. "Like I was sayin'," he slurs, hiccups, and then looks over both shoulders as if he's about to give over national secrets. The man behind him at the bar ignores us both. "It was fuckin' gross. Dude was in moth phase when we showed up."

"Moth phase?" I ask.

"You know, *moth* phase. Like, the last fuckin' bugs to show up to gnaw on the dead stuff."

"Oh," I say and nod my head.

"Okay, okay, so you got your necro-bugs, right? Necrophagous insects; the things that sniff out dead assholes and come lookin' for a snack. First to show up are flies, and there's all sorts of those. You got blow flies and flesh flies and cheese flies, and your typical house flies -"

"And shrimp gumbo, and shrimp-kabobs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo, pineapple shrimp, lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp," I try to joke. Max raises an eyebrow in confusion and takes another drink. "Nevermind," I say.

"After the flies come the beetles, and these little buggers come to *eat*. They'll find a hole and just burrow, you know what I'm sayin'?" He makes a squirming insertion of one finger into his other hand's closed fist. It's almost sexual. "Then when shit starts to dry out, you know?, you get the mites. They'll chew on the skin when it's all leather and jerky; turn a full grown man into a Slim Jim." He eyes me for a second to see if I'm going to get sick, but I've heard this song and dance every Dollar Draft night, so I just smile and nod. "And then come the moths. Man, I can tell you one thing, when the moths show up it's almost beautiful."

"Seriously?" I ask and eye his beer. It's almost gone. Sammy slides him another. *Thanks a lot, Sammy*, I think.

"Abso-fucking-lutely," Max says. "You walk in on an exposed corpse that's been turned into a moth buffet and it's like thousands of little angels pulling it apart and floating up into the sky."

I go to laugh but the man behind Max beats me to it. Max spins on his barstool and points a finger at him.

"You got a problem?" he asks.

"No problem here, buddy," the man chuckles. "Your story was just… entertaining." He takes a drink of clear liquid in a rocks glass. A single ice cube rattles around the bottom.

"Entertaining?" Max's voice is an octave higher than normal. "I'll have you know I'm the lead of this fine fuckin' city's forensics department, and I've … I've …" Max's head cocks to the right as he stares at the man. His right hand blindly searches the bar for his beer. Upon finding it he says, "And I've forgotten what I was going to say… But it would've been good!" He says pointing a finger into the man's chest. "Real fuckin' good."

The man smiles. *Too many teeth*, I think. "I'm sure it would have been brilliant," the man says without a trace of sarcasm. "Now, if it's a story you want, I may be able to oblige. If you don't mind, that is."

Max nods eagerly and does a half curtsy in his seat. I turn in my stool and face the bar. My beer is still full but I motion for Sammy to pull another. I watch Max and the man in the bar's dirty mirror.

The man takes another sip of his drink, smiles the same toothy smile, and then starts. "Now this might be old news to some of you, especially those in the forensics department," a wink to Max. "But did you ever hear what happened to Dr Brookstone over at Brookstone Dental?"

My face goes white. I can hear the blood crawl to a halt in my ears. I can see Max shaking his head no like an idiot child. *Yes you have!*, I think, hoping Max somehow learned to read minds in the last few beers.

"Well," the man continues. *Is he looking at me or Max?*, I wonder. The mirror is too dirty to be sure. "Over off of high street there is the oldest tiny house on top of the oldest tiniest hill that has been turned into one-person dental office operated by the oldest tiniest man, Dr

Brookstone."

The name makes my skin crawl.

"Dr Brookstone, being the only dentist in this wonderful city as you may know, keeps a rather tight schedule. Why, I was just there today wedged between last night's Homecoming Queen, and Mrs Gladwin and her new husband."

Today, I think, and my hand goes to my hip.

"Yes, today," the man repeats. He's definitely looking at me this time. Staring at me through a coat of dust on a cracked mirror. "When the little Homecoming Queen finished, rubbing her sore jaw and throat on her way out, I went into Dr Brookstone's quaint little office and sat in his chair. And do you know what he asked me?"

"What?" Max asked eagerly. I wanted to slap him.

"He asked me if I wanted nitrous oxide. Laughing gas! Good guy, am I right?" The man laughs, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes that bore into me from the mirror.

"Max," I whisper. "Max, maybe it's time for us to go!" I put a hand on his shoulder trying to turn him.

"Fuck off, Georgie," he says and shakes off my hand. "Can't you see this man is tryin' to tell us a story?"

"I of course said no; I'm not really into inebriations," the man continues, and as if to punctuate the statement Sammy reached over and filled the man's glass up with more water. "But, shit, who am I to judge the indulgences of others?" He takes a drink of his water and scratches soap residue off the the side of the glass with a well-manicured thumbnail. His eyes never leave me.

"Is there a point to this story, pal?" I ask.

That smile again. "Of course, *Georgie*. I was just getting there. See, I had my teeth cleaned, and I won't bore you with those details - "

"Thanks," I interrupt.

"But, what happened next is where the *meat* of the story resides."

I know what happens next, you bastard, I think. *What do YOU have to do with it?*

"After me was Mrs Gladwin. Lovely lady. I got to speak with her for just a moment before my appointment. Did you know she was just married last weekend?"

Yes, I did, I think.

"Well, what happens next is all a guess, but as it turns out -"

Blood. Everywhere there's blood. Not pools of it like I'm used to seeing in gunshot vics or stabbings, but sprays and fountains. My son would say it looks like somebody went crazy with a red paintball gun; not that I'd ever let him come to a crime scene with me. I can get passed the blood, I mean, we're all just thin meat sacs holding in gallons of liquid, but for some reason this scene…

Maybe it's the contrast of colors. The sterile room with its white furnishing and steel tools varnished in a thick coat of crimson coagulant. The pieces of filleted skin tossed about like meaty confetti. A half-digested thumb swimming in crusted bile on top of her engorged belly. Dr Brookstone crumbled beneath the reclined chair, his fleshless arm stretched out across his lap, strips of muscle pulled away like a spit-roasted lamb; some still caught between the teeth of the extracting forceps in his other hand. He's smiling, moth agape and drooling blood. Four of his front teeth are missing.

Mrs Gladwin lays on top of the chair. Under the harsh crane light her features are washed out in blaring white. Her eyes are rolled to the back of her head. Her mouth is stretched open with a large metal lip retractor, and her chin is draped in dried blood and bile. Slivers of the meat confetti line her cheeks and neck and hang down into her mouth.

I can feel my head go loopy and see the large green tank in the corner of the room. The nozzle is broken and giving off a near silent hiss sound. I clear the room and have the officers close and secure the door. We huddle in the outside room waiting for the men in masks to remove the gas. Mrs Gladwin's husband sits in a corner screaming until his throat tears.

"What did he say?" the man asks.

It takes me a full minute to realize he's talking to me. "Huh?" I say to the mirror.

“What did Mr Gladwin say?”

“I think the dentist fed my wife,” I mumble. I feel nauseous. Butterflies or moths are dancing in my stomach. Max is still staring stupidly at the man.

“Is that how she died? By being overfed?”

The way he says it, so calmly, so matter-of-factly like this is a conversation he’s had a thousand times before, makes my head spin. I try to look at him, to figure out who the hell this guy is, but his face is hazy in the mirror.

“Well?” he asks again.

“No, she didn't die from being overfed,” I say. “Well, maybe in a way she did. She choked.”

“Ah,” he says and takes another drink of his water.

I don’t know why, but I continue. “She choked on his tongue.”

I vomit. Regurgitated beers, peanuts, and pie spill out over the bar floor. Sammy rushes over to check on me and I wave him away. I heave three more times until my stomach is empty and then ask for a towel. “I’m sorry,” I say to the large barkeep. “I’ll clean it up.”

“Okay, Georgie,” he says with a worried grin.

I turn my head to the left and Max is looking at me, his head cocked, and an evil grin spreads across his face. “I told you the moths would get you!” He laughs.

“It wasn’t the moths, asshole,” I say and wipe my mouth. “It was - ”

I look over his shoulder and the other man is gone.

{G}remlin

A ’61 Eldorado, red with white interior, housing a 429 cu in V8, pushing all those pretty horses to whitewall tires wrapped around some clean chrome rims. *That’s* what should be in this garage, not some rusted AMC hatchback that was put together by a design team just competent enough to make every angle displeasing to the average eye. Four mismatched tires drooping and worn cling to life around brown 15” rims. The car sits so low to the ground that the front fender, if that’s what it’s even considered since it’s just a plastic flap, grinds atop not only speed bumps but *any* bump in the road higher than two inches. It was originally white, but one of the hundred or so owners along the way painted it black, so now it looks like a miniature hearse, which is fitting, I guess, given where it’s parked.

If you ignore the big hearse, the little hearse, the stack of economy coffins, and the whatever-the-fuck-that-is growling at me from the corner, this garage would be just like every other two-car rectangular box on this street. We’ve got two electric door-openers, though only one currently works, ceiling racks for bicycles we never ride, and a refrigerator full of cheap beer that I was trying to empty 12-ounces at a time before I was cornered behind this 1977 AMC Shitbucket. God, I wish I bought the Caddy. I had the option. I mean, the car itself wasn’t an option, but I had *an* option. I could marry the mysterious girl with the perfect ass, or live out bachelorhood drinking cheap beer and driving around in a bright red convertible – *God, I wish I bought the Caddy.*

And now… Well, now I’m bleeding out between the big hearse that came with her job, and the little hearse that came with our wedding. Her dad did a little work on the side, a little “I scratch your back you scratch mine” business transaction for some joker twenty years before I said “I do”, and this jackrabbit decides to gift us his beloved car for our wedding as a present? Whatever happened to toaster ovens and timeshares? I wonder what Jon would’ve given us if Old Papa Reynolds did a bit more than change a handful of CODs.

I know one thing for sure; if I hadn’t married her I wouldn’t be sitting in my boxers on a concrete floor drinking the warm remains of what is probably my last beer ever. And it’s a light beer. Seriously, I should’ve bought that damn Caddy. What’s the last thing I said to her? I know it wasn’t “Have a good day at work”, because for her to have a good day that means a lot of people have to die, and I’m just not that into profit I guess. I should be sad, right? Like, I should be thinking of all the happy times we had; the dancing, the vacations, the parties, and all the other stuff that never happened.

It’s moving again; slinking along the back wall like I can’t see it glowing in the light of the open fridge door. I don’t get the whole “stalk your prey” in this scenario. I’m obviously unarmed. Hell, I’m not even wearing pants. My only weapon is an almost empty beer can, and unless this thing plans on giving me a refill I think I’ll hold on to it, thank you very much. And it’s not like crumpled aluminum is going to do much damage on something like *that*. Was that its fingernails or some weapon? And why did it smell like smoke?

I lose sight of it for a minute as I swallow down the last of my beer and then something drops on the other side of the big hearse; a wet bag slapping on the concrete. There’s a whimper, a gargling howl, and then silence again. I consider being scared but I think I’m either too blitzed or too dead already to care.

I look at the empty can in my hand. Ah, hell. Might as well give it a shot. I toss the can over my shoulder like it’s a grenade from a bunker and plug my ears. It clinks across the floor, and the laughter hurts my stomach. Something long and ropey falls from the gash along my midsection, and my laughing stops. I have to scoop the rope up with my left hand and try to gently push it back in. This hurts much worse than I’d like it to, but, y’know, what are you gonna do? My fault for laughing in the first place, I guess. Once everything is back in, or at least not falling out onto my lap, I hold the cut closed with my fingers; pinching it along the edges until the skin turns white. My head starts to swim. Am I drunk or is this the end? A little bit of column A and a little column B probably.

There’s a familiar rolling sound from beneath the little hearse and I try to crane my neck to look through the ugly glass trapezoids some egghead in Detroit thought would be good windows. Cold metal comes to rest against my lower back. I fish around with my free hand and find the perspirating cylinder.

Beer? Maybe dying won’t be so bad. I rub my thumb across the label removing frost and leaving a trail of blood. *Light* Beer. Nevermind.

There’s another flash of movement; this time cutting across the two cars by the garage doors. It’s dragging something now. Sounds like someone kicking a raw Thanksgiving turkey across the floor.

Thanksgiving. Shit. Football. Double shit. Talk about bad timing.

I pull the can’s tab back and am sprayed with white frothy overflow. Beer pours down my chest and mixes into the wound. Maybe I’ll get drunk faster now that I don’t have much blood. I smile. That’s why she married me. This smile. When other guys turned green after their first visit to her house, I smiled all the way through dinner. When her previous fiancé had backed out when she admitted liking the work, I smiled when she told me. I smiled when I moved in, and I smiled this morning when I woke up next to her. I smile when I nurse hangovers in the kitchen and can smell the formaldehyde on her clothes. I smile. Maybe I just smiled at her when she left today? Maybe I didn’t say anything at all…?

Stop it. Sappy. No reason to get all mopey now. It is what it is. I sip from the can. Should I thank the thing that killed me for giving me a beer? I'm sure there's a precedent for this. Like, didn't Vikings drink and kill and drink some more? Am I a Viking? My beer gut says otherwise, but even that's deflating now. It's also turning grey. I wonder if Anita can trim that down for the funeral; a little post-mortem tummy-tuck.

There's a howl to my left. The garage door shudders as if something just ran headfirst into it, and then another long frustrated whimper. I want to tell it to push the button, but decide it may be better to spend my last few minutes focusing on myself and not that… thing.

I gulp down half the beer.

My boxers are sticking to my legs. The blood has pooled and soaked through the cotton. Dignity is not something I'm going to die with today. Oh well, it's not like I drive an Eldorado. I bang the back of my head against the side of the AMC for emphasis, and the thin metal doorframe nearly crumples. Maybe I should ask her to bury me in this car. It seems almost fitting.

There's moisture on my forehead now. Droplets of warm liquid fall down my face. The car sways behind me and I look up towards the ceiling. The thing is crouched on the roof of the tiny hearse, fingers grip the top of the window for stability, and its knees jut out over long toes. Purple paint chips off a few of the toes providing the only color besides the complete charred blackness of the thing's skin. It's dangling something over me; a long wet rope like the one that fell out of my stomach. Attached to the bottom is a writhing mass of red and black. Suddenly I'm sad Anita and I never had kids. She wanted to, but I didn't, and then by the time I came around it was too late. I suggested we adopt one, but she said no. She couldn't love anything that didn't come from her. I asked what about me and she just shrugged and walked away.

I take another gulp from my beer and the thing on top of the tiny hearse slaps me upside the head. Apparently it's not a big fan of reminiscing. It dangles the corded meat in front of my face and grunts. I feel the side of my head and the five welts that grow in a hand pattern. I look up again and two white eyes stand out on a black matte face. They're softer than what I expected, almost apologetic. Another grunt and then a light rectangular tool is dropped in my lap. A box opener. There's blood lining the blade. Does it want me to slit my wrists, because it might be disappointed when all that comes out is watered down pilsner? It shakes the dangling package again. A tiny limb flops out of the folded mass. Clarity breaks through for the briefest of seconds and with one swipe I cut the cord. The little package of writhing limbs falls into my lap and mixes with the blood softly trickling through my open wound.

I look up but the thing is gone. My vision is blurring. I can feel myself falling asleep, like being in my recliner post-Thanksgiving turkey binge with the Cowboys on TV. My eyes shut as my chin rests on my chest. My fingers relax around the wound and I wonder what Anita will think of our new daughter.

I slip into the ether.

Minutes or hours later the garage door is triggered from the outside. There is a loud shriek from the thing somewhere to my right. My legs are numb but I can sense the little package has been taken from my lap. The door sticks halfway up from where the thing knocked it off track. I hear a car door close outside and footsteps walking away. A dog barks in the distance.

My eyes start to close again. I'm slumped against the '77 AMC with a box cutter in one hand and my intestines in the other and I remember what I said to my wife as she left this morning.

"You make me happy."

I smile.

{H}umerous

“Can I see it?”

“No,” I say and turn sideways on the bench.

She’s pouting now, if it’s even *really* a pout, I mean, she’s freaking smiling at the same time. She knows I can’t hold out much longer, especially when she wears that shirt.

“Please?” She leans forward and puts both hands on my thigh. Cleavage pokes out from the tight flannel shirt whose top third she’s conveniently left unbuttoned. I try not to look, fail, force myself to look away, and then immediately look again. She catches me and the pout spreads to a full-blown smile. Damn it.

“Fine,” I say and slowly turn back towards her. Her hands slide up my thigh sending tingles into my stomach, and then she quickly pulls them away to cover her blushing face.

“You give in too easy, Chad,” she giggles and buttons two buttons on her shirt. “I was fully prepared to go all the way.”

Now I’m blushing.

“Not *that* all the way! God!” She playfully slaps my arm and then immediately regrets it. “Oh, I’m sorry! Did I hurt it?”

“No,” I lie. “It’s fine.” My left arm is clutched to my chest. I use my right to prop it up. Tara dips her head to the side trying to get a better look. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, I swear.” I shift on the bench; the wood is digging into my ass, and wince.

Tara notices. “Liar,” she says softly and reaches out a timid hand to touch my arm. “Do you think it’s broken?”

Yes, I want to say. “No.”

She pokes me gently and I try not cry out. “And it happens when you’re sleeping?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying not to think about the dreams. “I mean, I think so. I go to bed healthy and wake up, um, not so healthy, I guess.” I shrug.

“Did you tell your parents?”

I wince for a totally different reason.

“Oh god,” she says. “I’m so sorry. *Parent*. Did you tell your parent - your mom, I mean?” She puts a hand on my leg. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said that a lot,” I try to joke.

She acts like she’s going to slap me again, smiles that wonderful smile, and then places her hand back on my leg. “I’m sorry about your dad, Chad. And I’m sorry about your arm. I’m sorry about your wrist last month, and your foot the month before that.” She leans in to kiss me. “I’m sorry about your shoulder and your hand.” She closes her eyes. “And I’m sorry about -”

“His face!” a voice yells from the bottom of the hill behind us. “Don’t forget to apologize for *that* mess.”

“Shut-up, Derek,” I yell over my shoulder. “Can’t you see we’re trying to have a moment over here?”

Derek makes a farting sound and cackles.

“Moment’s over,” Tara says. She opens her eyes and kisses the tip of my nose. “And for the record, I like your face. Even if it is a bit lopsided.”

“Lopsided?!” I feign disgust and try to cover my face, but the pain rips through my arm. Tara’s smile falters for a second and then recovers.

“You ready?” Derek asks. He has climbed the hill and now stands behind me.

“Yep,” says Tara. She pulls a camera from a bag stashed under the bench and slings it around her neck.

I try to stand up but Derek puts a gentle hand on my good shoulder. “Not you, pal. You’re gonna sit this one out.”

“But,” I try to protest. Derek takes a knee beside me.

“Listen, dude. We’ve got to get in and out of old man Mcleritin’s before he gets home. And I know you’re fast; you run the forty in like 4.9, right?”

“4.6,” I correct him.

“4.6? Maybe with the wind at your back.” He winks. “But with that busted wing you’re gonna slow us down, and we can’t be slowed down today. You with me?”

I don’t want to, but I nod.

“Plus, we’ve got the big rivalry game in three weeks and I can’t have my best receiver on the sidelines ‘cause he didn’t rest up.”

“Fine,” I say and wiggle myself into a more comfortable position on the bench. “I’ll be your lookout. If anything happens I’ll make a bird sound or something. “

“*Can* you make bird sound?” Tara asks with a smile. I try to whistle but just blow air. “How about you just yell instead?”

“Okay, fine. Yelling it is.” They both turn to head down the hill. “And I’m only agreeing to be lookout because I want to kick Crestwater’s ass!” I shout after them.

Derek stops about halfway down the hill and turns back towards me. He’s wearing an ornery grin. “You gonna ask her?”

“Dude! C’mon, not cool,” I say.

Tara looks at both of us and raises an eyebrow. “Ask me what?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Have fun breaking and entering.” I try to wave but it hurts so I stop.

“Ask me what, Chad?” Tara starts her infamous pout again. Crap.

“He wants to take you to the homecoming dance,” Derek says.

“Derek, dude! Seriously, not cool,” I shout.

“Okay,” says Tara. The pout has been replaced by that smile again.

I feel myself turn red, “Okay? Okay as in you will?”

“Of course, Chad.” She turns on a heel and practically struts down the hill towards the rundown cabin. “Just keep an eye on me today so I’m not in jail that weekend.”

“I can do that!” I nod enthusiastically even though she can’t see me.

“Try not to stare at my ass like that when I walk away, lover boy,” Derek says with a laugh and trots off after Tara.

“I won’t,” I yell after him. My eyes never leave Tara until she disappears beneath the shadow of the cabin.

The cabin is an old A-frame tucked into the valley beneath a grove of ancient trees about three miles outside of town. It’s more of a rundown shanty than an actual cabin, but since no one my age uses the word shanty, cabin it is. For as long as I’ve been alive Mr. Mcleritin has lived here, but that’s only 17 years and the dude’s at least 100, so I’m sure he’s been here for much, much longer. The grass has never been cut and stands about knee high. Three trees encircle the house; half their branches dead and scraping the roof like brown skeleton arms. A dangerously slanted porch clings to the house’s frame and three crooked stairs lead up to a front door that hangs off of one rusted hinge. Outside the grove the sun shines, but inside the canopy the trees only allow a few weak rays to reach the house.

Out of inky shadows Derek appears and hoists himself up onto the porch, avoiding the stairs, and using an ivy-covered railing for support. He leans back and offers a hand as Tara works her way up the stairs. They pause at the door. Derek leans his ear forward, pauses, and then nods to Tara. She looks back towards the hill and waves. I smile as butterflies twist knots in my stomach.

I lose sight of them as they go inside. Five windows line the front of the house; four on the first floor and a small one in the attic at the peak of the A. I watch the two windows on either side of the door hoping for a glimpse of their shadows. A car crests the hill behind me and I hold my breath as it passes hoping it won’t turn off and go down towards the cabin. The rusted black hatchback continues its course north; the guy behind the wheel waving as he goes. I exhale and look back to the house. Two black shadows stand in front of the far left window.

There's a flash of light and then they disappear. A second later they reappear in the left window closest to the door. There's another flash of light and they disappear again.

"C'mon," I urge them. "Take the pictures and get out."

A moment passes and then the shadows fill the far right window on the opposite side of the house. There's a flash of light and for the briefest of seconds I think I see movement in the upstairs attic. I stare at the small window for a full minute, and then look back to my friends. *Nothing there*, I think. It was probably just a bird or something.

Now Derek and Tara stand in front of the right window closest to the door, their shadows filling up most of the frame. They lean in towards each other like they're talking and then there's a flash of light. The two of them shift, and then another flash. Shift again, another flash. Shift again, and - *there's third shadow in the room next to them!* – another flash. I blink, and look again. Nothing. Derek and Tara turn again and – *there is definitely another shadow in that window!* – another flash.

"There's someone there!" I scream.

There's a face at the first window. Tara is peering through; her hands cupped to either side of her head.

"There's someone there!" I scream again. "Get out!" I try to wave but the pain makes my head spin. Tara shakes her head like she can't understand me.

Derek taps her on the shoulder and she turns away from the window, reducing her to another shadow in that dilapidated house.

"You have to get out of there!" I try yelling again.

There's a flash of light and my eyes dart to the far right window. Nothing. It's empty. My heart starts to slow. Another flash of light and now there are three shadows in that room! My head spins. My throat tightens. I go to stand but forget about my arm and try using it to push off the bench and the pain crumples me to my knees. I gasp for air and try to scream. The only thing that comes out is Tara's name and it's swallowed up by the dirt between my knees. I look up from the ground, white hot pain shoots up my arm and through my neck. There are three people in front of me. Tara and Derek are sprinting up the hill. Tara is crying and Derek's face is pinched down into sheer horror. Behind them in the attic a third person, a girl, bangs on the window.

"Get up, Chad. We've got to go!" Derek screams from fifteen feet away. I ignore him; I can't stop staring at the window. "Chad!" He's in front of me now shaking my shoulders. "Chad! We have to go!"

The pain rips me back to the present. I look at him, he's crying now too. "Stop it, D. You're hurting me." I look back to the window. She's gone.

"I'm sorry, buddy. But we have to go." He's nearly composed now, but one tear has broken free from the corner of his eye. Tara weeps into her hands. Her flannel shirt is torn.

"Where's your camera?" I ask, but Tara cries harder.

"It took it," Derek says and helps me to my feet.

"It?"

"It. Man, I don't know what it was. A person maybe? Ripped the camera off her before we could even really see it."

"Help me outta this," I say and start pulling off my sweatshirt.

"Why?"

"Because she's gonna get cold, dude." We manage to pull the sweatshirt up over my head and gingerly remove my arm. Derek gasps. My short sleeved t-shirt doesn't hide the five bruises that encircle my biceps. The bruising radiates out turning my arm into a ghastly camouflage of reds and purples. "It's not that bad," I say and try to pull my sleeve down for cover.

"Did your brother do this to you?!" He's seething. Ever since Derek took Steven's starting QB position they have never gotten along.

"No. I told you, it happens while I sleep. It's not my brother." I walk over to Tara and put my good arm around her shoulders. She buries her head in my chest. Her hair smells like strawberries and vanilla. It's still warm outside, but she's shivering. I try to wrap her in my sweatshirt. "What happened in there?"

Derek looks back at the house. "There was something in there."

“I got that part…”

“No, besides *it*. There was something else. Something in that room.” He points to the right window closest to the door. My eyes go to the attic. “On the walls.”

“Pictures,” Tara says into my shirt and then cries again. I look back to Derek and raise my eyebrows.

He nods. “Weird shit too. Like, there were pictures of the town, mostly the diner. And not just recent ones. Pictures in black and white and newspaper clippings. There were pictures of houses – “

“Houses on *Derek’s* street,” Tara interrupts.

“Really?” I ask.

“Yep,” he says. “Spooky shit. Like pics of my house, the Reynolds' house, and that house where the Vanderson’s used to live across the street.”

“So he’s some old peeping tom? No big deal. We’ll just tell Tara’s dad.”

“No!” Tara says. She pushes herself off of me, sees my bare arm, and presses a hand to her mouth.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I lie again.

She puts a hand on my upper arm. It feels ice cold on my burning skin. “What are we going to tell him; that we broke into some old guy’s house because he was hanging around the football field acting weird? My dad would arrest *us*! Besides, there was more in there than just pictures,” Tara says.

“What? The bones on the floor?” asks Derek. “That’s probably nothing. They looked like animals.”

“Not the bones, Derek. The markings on the walls and floor.”

Derek paces nervously still looking at the house. “You mean the blood.”

“Blood?” I say and take step back. “What about blood?”

Derek turns to face me and raises his hands to calm me down. “It’s no big deal. Old guy just drew some symbols on the floor around the animal bones – and they were definitely animal bones – and a few more on the wall. Just some crazy old guy drawing pictures, that’s all. And hell, it might’ve just been red paint.”

“It wasn’t paint, Derek!” Tara scolded. “It didn’t smell like paint!”

“Fine. It was blood, but again, probably just an animal.”

“What kind of symbols?” I ask.

“Just some weird shit on the floor, like shapes with zigzags and pentagrams.”

“Sigils,” Tara said.

“Sure, sigils. Whatever those are,” said Derek.

“And arrows.”

“Tara, he doesn’t need to know –“

“Arrows?” I ask. “Arrows pointing at what?”

“It’s not a big deal, dude,” says Derek. “Don’t worry about it.”

Tara shoots him a dirty look. She stares at my arm for a second and then looks me in the eye. “The arrows pointed to two pictures on the wall. One was of his wife. It was a wedding photo from a long, long time ago. He drew a heart around that one. The other one –“

“Tara, don’t,” says Derek.

“The other one,” she continues. “The other one was of you, Chad.” My blood turns cold. “It was a picture of you from last year. And it…”

She pauses and looks at my arm again. “And it had an X drawn through it.”

I look over her shoulder at the house. It seems to cower away from the early morning sun. In the top window, shadowed by dying trees, a young girl bangs on the window with one hand and clutches her belly with the other.

“We should go,” I say.

{I}nn

“I’m huge!” My voice echoes off pealing wallpaper and smoke-stained plaster. When’s the last time I heard my own voice? When’s the last time I actually talked? Am I really *that* boring? My eyes venture down the mirror towards my midriff again. I’ve pulled up an old Crestwater sweatshirt to show my belly. It still smells like him; the sweatshirt not my belly. I mean my belly *might*… I shake my head. Easy, Ashley, I think. No need to get ahead of yourself.

Something in the mirror catches my eye. “No!” I shriek and then immediately cup my hand to my mouth. That was *really* loud. I giggle, then cry, then try to do both at the same time and give myself a headache. They weren’t kidding about the hormones. I take a step closer to the mirror. Plastic cups wrapped in cellophane sit next to a single serving coffeemaker. They block my view. I bend over to push them to the side and a sharp pain digs into my left rib. “Okay, okay, no bending. Jeez!” and stand back up. I rock up onto my tiptoes and, “Yep. Turkey’s done,” I say. My innie is now an outie. I push the sweatshirt back down, but not before bringing it to my nose for a quick sniff. “You’re ridiculous,” I say to the stupid redhead in the mirror. She nods in agreement. There’s a knock at the door.

I rush across the tiny room, practically skipping by the two twin beds, and pull open the door. A cool early-Fall breeze blows against my legs. I slam the door shut.

“Ashley?” The familiar voice on the other side says.

“Pants!” I shout. I can feel my face turn red.

“What?”

“Pants! Err... I mean, One second. I need to, um… freshen up!” *Freshen up*? Seriously? Now he’s going to think I’m giving myself a moist toilette bath. Moist. Gross. Who uses that word?

“Ashley? I can come back later.”

“No, Cal,” I shout from a crouched position behind the far bed. Where the hell are my pants?! “One more second and – AHA!”

“Are you okay?”

I pull the pants on and skip to the door. “I’m perfect,” I say as I swing open the door.

“You’re *huge*!” His pupils swim in wide eyes. Great, Cal Mackey is going to pass out on my doorstep. Well, not *my* doorstep; more like my rented doorstep, but since this is my only home at the moment…

“That’s not really what a girl likes to hear,” I say and work my way under an arm and guide him to the bed. He sits down in a confused slouch; his eyes never leave my stomach,

“But… but…,” stammers.

“You like it?” I tease. “It’s the latest fall fashion. All the girls at school are wearing it these days!” I do an awkward spin and thrust my belly forward. He starts to turn green. Okay, he’s not in the mood, I think. “Don’t worry, there’s only one in there. I’ve had, like, a million ultrasounds just to be sure.” The green shade gets darker. Crap. “It’s okay, Cal. I’m okay.” I sit next to him, put a hand on his shoulder, and kiss his cheek. “*We’re* okay.” Another sharp pain; this one in right rib.

“But… but… how?”

“Well, when a man loves a woman they get married, and then the man hooks up with one of his students and – “

“How long?” He asks.

“About seven months. Maybe eight. I don’t really know.”

“I can’t tell Lois,” he blurts out. His eyes never leave my stomach.

I try to lift his head up with my hand, but he resists. “She doesn’t need to know. I won’t tell her. “

“But, what are you …? “ His voice trails off. He finally looks into my face. He seems much older than I remember.

“I don’t know. I’ll stay here for a few more days and then go to my brother Dan’s house. I haven’t talked to him yet, and he sure as hell doesn’t know about this –” There’s a sharp pain in my sternum. Can a baby kick that high? “I’ll be fine,” I grunt out.

“Ashley, I can’t do this,” he says. “I mean, when you texted me to meet you here after all this time,” he’s starting to panic. You sure know how to pick ‘em, Ash. “When you texted me I was going to tell you this whole thing, what we did, it was a mistake.” He’s standing now, backing away from me. Cue the Lifetime original movie music. I roll my eyes internally. “Jacob was turning five, and Lois… she wasn’t paying attention to me. So I –” He points at me. “*We* did some things I’m not proud of –” Really? You seemed pretty happy at the time, I think. “So this can’t happen. It can’t. You understand?”

“Yep,” I say and stand up. He recoils from me. I wouldn’t be surprised if he held up his fingers in a cross to ward off the evil in my belly. I stifle a laugh. “Hold on.” I hold my breath and puff out my cheeks.

“What are you -?”

I hold up one finger. I can feel my face turning blue. I want to giggle and cry again.

“Ashley?” He steps forward. “Ashley, stop!”

I blow out the air and look down. “Damn it,” I say. “I thought I could suck it back in; reabsorb it, y’know?” I’m giggling.

“That’s not funny,” he says. “You could hurt the baby.”

“See, Junior? You do care!”

“Don’t call me that!” He shouts and then follows with, “Sorry.”

The mood in the room changes. “How is your dad, by the way?”

“He’s fine, I guess. We just put him in a home last month.”

“Oh Cal, I’m sorry.” I go to hug him but he raises a hand to stop me. There’s an explosion of pain in my spine. Either this little thing is going to be the next Jet Li or I’ve got a kangaroo in my stomach. I giggle again and then start crying. Freaking hormones!

His hand is on the doorknob now, he’s leaving. Part of me knew he would. Actually, who am I kidding? *All* of me knew he would, I just hoped …

“I can’t be a part of this,” he says. His eyes are fixed on the inn’s faded carpeting. “If you need money or whatever I can get you some –“

“I don’t need money,” I say.

He waves it off. “Just text me or email me, but don’t call. Please.” He looks at me. The door is open now. Behind him an old Crown Victoria pulls into a parking space in front of my room. It’s one of those decommissioned cop cars that still have the flood lights hooked to the windshield. I’m staring at it when he walks away. “I’m sorry, Ash,” he says over his shoulder.

Now the door’s shut and I really want pizza. I’m not sad, not yet. I’m hungry. It’s nature overriding my needs and focusing on the baby or some crap like that. I scan the room for my purse and see it wedged between a backpack and an Idiot’s Guide to Pregnancy book. I should’ve bought the Idiot’s Guide to Idiots, I think, and bend over. There’s a pain…

Darkness…

I wake up on the floor. My pants are wet and there’s crusted vomit on my sweatshirt. Good, I think. Now it won’t smell like him. I try to sit up but each movement causes bright lightning bolts of agony that trace every nerve down my legs. I start to cry and then giggle. At least I know *that* part of my brain still works. I roll to a side and my vision goes grey. It’s dark in my room except for a faint red light that glows from the coffeemaker’s power button. I try to push myself up to my feet, but feel unbalanced, so I crawl to the bed. Somehow I pull myself up and sit awkwardly on the edge. My hands are on my knees and I’m trying to get my head right when a ripple forms in the middle of my sweatshirt and cascades from one side to the other. I blink, try to refocus, and then shake my head. “Weird time for morning sickness,” I say to the empty room.

My vision returns and I try to stand. I’m thirsty and this sweatshirt stinks. Stinks *like him*, I think and then immediately shake it off. “Asshole,” I say and make my way to the sink using the walls for support. There’s a fluttering around the light that sends the room into a pulsing red strobe. I find the light switch next to the vanity and flick it on. A large white moth bounces off the coffeemaker two more times and then heads straight for the 60w bulb above me. I swat at it to keep its wings from my face and the movement sends pain radiating out from my stomach. I look into the mirror and see a large lump form under the sweatshirt and then disappear again. “I definitely saw it that time,” I say to the girl opposite me.

I strip off the stained sweatshirt and wet pants so I’m just standing in my matching bra and panties. The romantic side of my brain sighs as

the cynical side cackles. You thought you were going to get lucky tonight, it howls. Matching underwear? Seriously? I stare at my belly for a second taking in the faint stretch marks that cut through freckles and pale skin. And then it moves.

A small bump forms just over my bellybutton. It grows and expands until it's the size of a toothbrush, and then the end spreads and five little fingers press out against my skin. I feel a motherly warmth wash over me. I forget about Cal. I forget about the annoying moth fluttering about the light. I forget about this cheap inn I've been stuck in for a week because I didn't have the courage to call Cal earlier. I forget about Cal *again*. I forget it all and just focus on the tiny thing inside of me reaching out to say hello. "Hello," I say into the mirror. And then another tiny nub forms on the left side of my stomach. It too grows in size and then spreads out; a second tiny hand reaching for me. I'm beaming. The girl in the mirror mimics my smile.

And then a third nub forms. My head swims. "The doctor said only one!" I yell. The fingers of that fist spread open just as a forth bump surfaces and opens into a hand. I'm half excited, half terrified. A fifth hand juts out. And then a sixth and a seventh. As the eighth one pushes up I'm overcome with revulsion. My stomach is twisting over on itself. I'm going to vomit again. Eight tiny hands with forty tiny fingers open and flex under my skin sending ripples of disgust and terror through my body.

I throw open the bathroom door and turn on the light. A thousand moths swarm out at me; a never-ending horde of them pushing through a crack in the ceiling. Their wings beat at my face and hair. One flies into my mouth. I scream and turn away. The girl in the mirror, a tiny redhead who only months ago was worried about going to homecoming, stares back at me with a bulging stomach teeming with tiny little hands pressing out from under the skin. It looks like a flesh-colored squid writhing above her waist. I choke on the insect in my mouth and rush for the door. I've got to get out of here! The moths trail me, the hands press out on my stomach with such force it feels like my skin will rip away. I swing open the door to the night air and am blinded by a bright light.

Before I can pull up my arms to shield my eyes a bag is placed over my head. I try to scream, but a hand clamps over my mouth as the monster squirms in my stomach.

{J}unior

“Cal?” I say. “Cal, they’re coming.”

He’s staring out the double pane windows hunched over with both hands in his jeans pockets. His hat is pulled down low over eyes that won’t look at me. The gray sky rumbles and clouds froth with the coming storm. I can smell the day’s sweat on him.

“Cal?” I say again. The pain is coming like the storm; rumbling and frothing in my belly. “Cal, please?”

He turns. His face is haggard; much too old for someone his age. There’s moisture in his eyes that nearly masks the twinkle of excitement. “They’re coming?” His lips attempt a smile, but strain against the frown he’s been wearing for weeks. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I lie. Both of my hands go to the bulge underneath the white sheets. I can feel movement beneath the skin like a writhing bag of alien limbs. “You shouldn’t have taken me to see that movie.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He’s beside me now, his calloused hand resting on my stomach.

“I keep imagining them bursting out of my chest.” I try to laugh, but a contraction has me biting my tongue instead. Warm blood pools in my cheek. I squeeze his hand until his fingers turn purple.

“Should I call someone?” Bright flares of panic explode in the corners of his eyes.

“Like who? Your brother?” I don’t know why I say this, and immediately I’m apologizing. As the contraction subsides I release Cal’s hand. It lingers on my belly for a moment and then he pulls it away as he crosses the room. “Couldn’t you just forgive him or at least forget about it for a day? Just today?”

“No,” he says without turning around. He’s looking out into the hallway now.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you two but it can’t be so bad that he misses -” Another contraction. I feel myself screaming. Cal’s at my side again. Strong hands envelope mine as I squeeze.

“Doctor!” he yells. “Nurse!”

I open my eyes to see a young brunette in blue scrubs. She’s checking the machines that line the bed and feeling for my pulse. Her hands are reassuringly warm.

“How far apart are they?” she asks in a voice barely above a whisper.

“A minute maybe,” Cal says. “I donnu. I didn’t count the last one.”

“It’s okay. You’ve got more important things to worry about,” she winks at him and pushes hair out of my face. “I’m thinking you’re about ready, hun,” she says to me. “I’ll call the doctor and we’ll get that baby out.”

“Babies,” I correct her.

There’s an almost imperceptible flash on her face. Warm blue eyes that matched her scrubs collapse into hollow black holes. Thin red lips peel back to show sharpened rows of teeth that quiver in wet gums. In less time than it took me to acknowledge the change she shifts back to a young sweet girl with a comforting smile. “Of course. *Babies*.” She winks again at Cal who’s staring intently at me, and then leaves the room.

“You okay?” He asks me. “You’re sweatin’ pretty bad.”

He puts a gentle hand to my forehead and I melt a little. “I’m perfect now, Cal. Just nerves.” He leans in and kisses my belly, then moves up and kisses my lips and forehead.

“I’m here,” he says. “I’m not gonna leave your side. You can squeeze my hand ‘til the fingers break.” A small smile fights its way to the surface of his face. “But don’t, okay? I still gotta work.”

I give his hand a gentle squeeze as a doctor hurries into the room. He’s staring intently at a clipboard and nearly runs into the bed. “Oops!” he says and looks up.

My blood curdles. It feels like both babies in my gut are clawing their way up into my throat. My heart beats a racehorse pulse in my ears. The doctor’s face is a mask of horror. His cheeks are pinned back with staples. A jagged line of flesh cuts diagonally upwards from both

corners of his mouth giving him a clown's gaping smile. Black holes smoke where his eyes should be and rows of pointed teeth gleam in the harsh hospital light. He tilts his head sideways and one ear dangles down on a thin strand of oozing flesh. I try to scream but a contraction forces my mouth and eyes shut.

"Oh dear," the monster says. "Oh dear. Oh dear. Nurse?"

Cal is holding my hand. He's reminding me to breathe.

"Yes, doctor?"

It's the nurse from before. I'm too scared to open my eyes. I focus on Cal whispering softly to me, "Breathe, darlin'. Breathe."

"We've got a problem," the doctor says and I open my eyes. He's normal again, almost boring. Plain features on a plain face. He nods to me and then taps some of the machines. He almost looks worried. "We're going to need to get a bit hands on right now." He walks around to the foot of the bed.

"What's goin' on, doc?" asks Cal.

"Her heart rate is dropping with each contraction. I'm afraid this may be putting the baby in danger."

"Babies," I correct him.

He looks at me strangely. His features don't seem to line up with his face as he tilts his head. "Did you have an ultrasound?"

Another contraction.

"No," says Cal for me. "We, uh, couldn't really afford one."

"Oh," says the doctor and smiles widely at the nurse. "Then how do you know there are two?"

"I just know!" I scream over the pain.

The nurse pats my shoulder. My skin burns from her touch. The doctor looks over to Cal and gives him an "I'm the doctor here" shrug. "Well, let's just see. Okay?" He lifts up the sheet and then …

Tremendous pain. I'm split in two while clawed hands tear through flesh to retrieve the life that grew inside of me. I howl in agony. Seconds last hours. Minutes last an eternity. I scream until blood ruptures in my throat. I'm echoed by a tiny voice trumpeting his existence.

"It's a boy!" the doctor says. I blink back to consciousness. There's a grey creature covered in clumpy mucus held out in front of me. "Congratulations, Mrs. Mackey."

I try to raise my arms to receive my son, but they won't lift from the sheets.

"What's his name?" asks the nurse.

I look pleadingly over to Cal, but he's entranced by the child. "Cal?" I whisper with the last of my voice. I feel the sheets dampening around my legs.

"Just like his daddy," the nurse beams. "Let's get little Cal cleaned up." She takes the baby from the doctor, caries him over to a table, and places him under a heat lamp. "Want to watch, daddy?"

Cal nods and follows, not before squeezing my hand one last time. The room is losing its color.

"Nurse," the doctor says. "She's losing a lot of blood."

For a moment Cal's attention is back on me. He takes a step towards the bed but the nurse grabs his arm. "Mr. Mackey, you're going to need to come with me."

"But, my wife…"

"She'll be fine. You just need to let the doctor do his job." She pushes him out of the room and pulls the door shut. But before it closes all the way he blows me a kiss. A tear breaks free from my eye and makes a path down my face.

With the door shut the doctor turns back towards the bed. "Now," he says with a grin. "Let's get that other one out."

My eyes go wide. I try to shout for Cal, for anybody, but my throat won't work. The nurse walks over to the side of my bed and leans in close to my face. "Looks like you were right," she whispers. "*Babies*." There's a shimmer on her face like looking at someone underwater. It morphs to that of a gargoyle and then shifts back just as fast. She uses her middle finger to wipe away the tear.

"This may sting a bit," the doctor says and lifts the sheet again.

I don't feel anything. I don't feel the claws ripping me open. I don't feel his hands thrusting into my body. I don't feel the baby pulled out by its back leg, or its tiny fingers trying to hold on to its safe haven inside of me. I don't feel anything at all.

The doctor raises the child up by one foot and licks the blood off its leg. It whimpers in his hand. "It's a girl!" he says.

The nurse claps. "I think we'll hold on to this one, you know, for safe keeping," she says to me and pats my head.

"What do you want to name her, dear?" The doctor hands the baby to the nurse who coddles her then kisses her nose. The nurse smiles and her lips are red with blood.

"How about we name her after my mother?" she asks.

"That's a great idea!" the doctor says.

My blood is slowing to a trickle. I'm forgetting how to breathe. My eyes flutter shut and the last thing I hear is the nurse saying, "World, meet my daughter. Greta, meet the world."

Edit: I wake up and I'm alone.

{K}eg

The car pulled off a sideroad and down a dirt path that seemed to end in a tunnel of trees. “Is this the place?” I asked from the backseat. Neither Bo or Kaitlyn said anything. I took another sip from my beer and tried to not to grimace from the taste. I didn’t do so well.

“Still being a little wuss, huh Farah?” Bo sneered into the rearview mirror.

Kaitlyn turned around and put a hand on my knee. “Y’know, you have to fake it if you don’t like it, Far. How else will the boys ever like you?” She winked at me and put a hand in Bo’s crotch. The Oldsmobile swerved off the road for a second, kicking up rocks and dirt.

“Maybe I don’t care if they like me,” I muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” I stared out the window into eternal blackness. “I thought the country was supposed to have stars.”

“Not when it’s cloudy,” Bo said. “Don’t worry, they’ll have a few gennys at the house. There will be lights and -”

“And music?” Kaitlyn asked. “‘Cause I wanna dance!” She shouted the last part out the front window; the warm night air blew her hair back in a flag of blues and pinks. Sometimes I wondered how we were related.

“Sure,” said Bo. “You can dance all you want. There it is.” The one headlight of the Cutlass sliced dark shadows across a slanted structure. It was two stories high with the middle collapsing down on itself like a massive dimple. The exterior was charred to a charcoal finish, and reflected some of the light in a muted refraction of greys and blacks.

“Where are we?” I asked. The late spring air coming through the open window turned cold under the canopy of trees.

“I donnu,” Bo said. “Some townie’s house. Burned down a couple nights ago.”

“But what about the cops?”

“But what about the cops?” Kaitlyn mimicked me. “God, you are so lame, Far.” She pulled the handle on the door and kicked it open; her laugh harmonizing with the squeaking hinge.

Bo turned around in his seat. “It’s going to be okay. The place was practically deserted before it burnt down. There was just some old guy living here. He set fire to the place himself. The cops came and went already. Steven said they’re tearing it down next week.”

“Steven?” I felt my face turn red.

“Yeah,” said Bo with a wink. “He’s here. This was his idea.” He looked out the windshield to the front of the car where Kaitlyn was twirling in the single lamp’s spotlight. Her 30 ft shadow danced on top of the house behind her. One white moth fluttered about her hair like a an escaped ash from a flame. “Let’s go, okay? It’s going to be fun, I promise.” He kicked open the door and flipped off the headlight. Kaitlyn stopped twirling and pouted in the darkness.

“Fun. Right,” I said to myself. I climbed out of the car and left my beer in the backseat. The interior light blinked out as I shut the door and I was immediately cast into a claustrophobic swath of blackness. I froze in my tracks, the damp air coating my bare legs and causing me to shiver. Gooseflesh rippled up my arms and I could feel something breathing on my neck. I was about to scream when a faint light flicked on from my right side.

“Hey, Farah,” said a voice behind me. He was so close I could feel his lips move on the nape of my neck.The light flipped over revealing a cellphone that shone down and barely lit an overgrown dirt path. “You’ve gotta be careful out here in the dark.”

“Hi, Steven,” I said.

One arm wrapped around my chest from behind and pulled me into him. He kissed my cheek and then let me go. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me too,” I lied.

Somewhere in the dark music started playing. The heavy bass beat in counter rhythm to my heart. There was a low growl, a mechanical whine, and then the left side of the crooked building exploded in fluorescent light. I tried to shield my eyes, but Steven grabbed my hand and drug me forward. “Come on!” He shouted over the music. “The party’s starting!”

I tripped over my own feet but managed to follow him without falling on my face; my worn Converse shoes barely finding purchase in the

gravel. For a brief moment I wondered how Kaitlyn managed to walk let alone dance in those heels, and I settled on the theory that she got all the coordination in our family.

We rounded the left corner of the house and skidded to a halt. Three worklights split off from two generators and circled one lone keg. A tap frothed and spit beer as someone I'd never seen before pumped watered-down pilsner into red cups. Steven ran off saying something about getting us drinks. The wind picked up behind me and brought the smell of old smoke and some sweet pungent stench like rotting meat or decay.

"Are you sure no one is coming?" I asked, but no one heard me. A jockish guy in a Crestwater varsity jacket was lifting Kaitlyn over the keg. She was upside down, her skirt falling towards her chest showing off a tiny pair of pink underwear that said "Kiss it!" on the butt. I blushed.

"She's not embarrassed by anything," Bo said from beside me. I must've jumped because he laughed and then said, "It must be weird."

"What is?" I asked. Kaitlyn was sucking on the end of the tap while another guy in a varsity jacket cheered on from the side.

"Seeing yourself up there."

"But I'm not -"

"I mean if you look past Kaitlyn's hair and dress you two *are* identical."

"So?" I didn't like where this was going.

"So," he laughed. "Even if you're not up there right now, you still are in a way. All those guys drooling over my girlfriend's ass are really drooling over your ass as well, Far."

My hands instinctively went to the back of my jean shorts. I wished I had stayed home. "Great, so everyone here is a perv like you, Bo."

"Nah," he said and started walking away. "I'm the only one that's seen you both naked."

"You have not!" I protested.

"I've seen her," he shouted over his shoulder and then he was beside the keg helping Kaitlyn down. She teetered on her feet before falling into his arms and giving him a sloppy kiss.

I looked back to the Oldsmobile, but it was swallowed up by the darkness. "Now what?" I asked myself. Steven was making his way up onto the keg. I didn't want to join the others but the darkness felt like it was creeping up behind me, so I walked over to the center of the circle.

Steven saw me and smiled. He was balanced with his hands on the keg and his feet on the shoulders of the bigger jock. "Wish me luck," he said and then was pushed up into a handstand. Bo began pumping the tap while Kaitlyn shoved the nozzle in Steven's mouth. Everyone cheered but me.

I screamed.

Everyone turned to stare at me. Steven lost his grip and plunged straight down onto the lip of the keg exploding the bridge of his nose. Blood mixed with beer and sprayed everywhere.

"What the fuck?!" he shrieked.

And still I screamed.

"Farah! Farah!" Kaitlyn yelled. "Far, knock it off!" She pushed me awkwardly, the keg stand already taking its toll on her, and I fell sideways into one of the guys I didn't know. He was too shocked to catch me and we ended up bumping heads. I winced and when I did I closed my eyes for the briefest of seconds. When I opened them the thing was gone. I stopped screaming. I felt like the world and everything in it swarmed on me at once. I was dizzy, lost, and terrified.

"Seriously, what the fuck, Far?" Steven yelled. He had pulled off his t-shirt and was using it to stymie the blood.

"No one else saw it?" I whispered. My eyes never left the house.

"Saw what?" The big jock asked. His voice was much higher than I expected.

"I don't know. It was something…"

“You broke my nose, Far!” Steven yelled. “You broke my nose because of *something*?!” He seemed to only take one step but he covered the ten feet between us in a flash. He was holding the shirt to his face with one hand and poking me in the collarbone with other. “What did you see?!”

I tried to back away but my feet were frozen. “Something… something… something - I don’t know what. Something moved in there. Something…” I felt myself wanting to cry, but I held back the tears. Steven’s finger was digging into my chest.

“There’s nothing in there. It’s empty. It’s *been* empty,” he said.

“How can you be sure?”

“He’s sure,” Kaitlyn said. She was pissed. “Quit being such a baby.”

“I want to go home,” I said. I looked at Kaitlyn, she crossed her arms and shook her head. I looked over at Bo. He seemed to think about it for a second and then walked over to Steven.

“Your call, buddy,” he said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Steven said, staring holes into me. “Not until that keg is dry.”

There was whooping and high-fives and then all the guys circled the keg. One of the smaller jocks was flipped upside down and their ritual continued. Kaitlyn stood across from me, her arms still crossed.

“Kat, please? Please can we go? There’s something in that house; there’s something *out here*.”

“Quit being such a nerd,” she said. “ Why can’t you just have fun? Why can’t you stop being so…” She unfolded her arms and put her hands on her hips. “For once in your life just act like me!” She stomped off towards the others.

“I know what I saw,” I said to the air where she used to be, except I didn’t. I had no clue what I saw. It could have been one of the flood lights shining through a broken window and reflecting off chunks of the charred interior wall, but it wasn’t. It could have been an animal scavenging for food, but nothing ran out off the house when I screamed.

It was still in there.

“It’s still in there,” I whispered. I turned to the circle of strangers. My sister was pushing a nozzle into one of their upturned faces like a diver adjusting their snorkel. “It’s still in there!” I shouted.

Everyone froze. Steven’s back was towards me and I saw it hunch over. He finished the beer in his hand and then threw the cup on the ground. Bo leaned in and said something to him, but I couldn’t hear what. As Steven turned around he dropped his bloodied shirt on the ground and fished a black rectangle from the front pocket of his jeans. With a flick of his thumb a two inch blade pushed up from the handle. He stalked towards me.

“Steven, I’m sorry -” I raised my hands, and he was there beside me; moving with inconceivable speed. He grabbed me under one armpit and drug me towards the house; the boxcutter pointing the way.

“You just won’t shut up about it, huh?” He snarled. Spit and blood spotted my face. Both his eyes were starting to blacken. “Then why don’t we go on in there, find what’s freaking you out, and I’ll add it to my wall?” He shook the blade for emphasis.

“Steven, I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet - “

“Look at my face, Far.” He stopped and pulled me close. He smelled like beer and wintergreen dip. “Sorry ain’t gonna cut it. Something’s gonna have to die.” He drug me forward to a broken window. “Go.”

“But, -”

“Go,” he repeated and pointed with the blade.

“Just go in there, Farah,” Kaitlyn yelled from the keg. “The two of you need some alone time anyway.” She laughed.

Apparently I got all the common sense in the family, I thought. I tried to pull myself up through the window, but couldn’t manage to get my leg over the sill. All of a sudden Steven’s hand was on my ass pushing me up.

“At least I got *something* out of tonight,” he laughed.

I tried to swat his hand away but lost my balance and toppled head first into the house. I landed on a collapsed dining room table in a cloud of ash and debris. The air was knocked out of my lungs and I gasped for breath. Steven poked his head up over the ledge and laughed.

"You're obviously not the graceful one," he said. "Now get up and chase whatever's in there to the front door. I'll take care of it from there. Do not fuck it up." He bared his teeth and then disappeared around the side of the house.

As oxygen fought its way back into my lungs the full view of the room swam in on me. The space was small, cramped, and filled with the charred remains of thousands of books. Shelves slumped along crooked walls, and a large recliner melted in on itself in a corner; springs pierced the leather like some sort of medieval torture device. I shuddered and got to my feet. I stood still and listened. The noises from outside were muted by the walls, and inside the house nothing made a sound besides my rapid breath.

"Hello?" I called out to the darkness. There was no reply. Of course there was no reply, I thought. I'm standing in the middle of a dead house. I tiptoed through the room with my arms across my chest, hugging myself. It seemed to be twenty degrees colder in there. The room's door was marred with smoke and lay propped against the doorframe. I stepped around it and walked into the hallway.

The hallway was short enough that I could see the other end in the dark. Three rooms split off to the right ahead of me. A small foyer with a teetering staircase bisected the hallway after the closest room. I took a few steps forward and looked through the first door. A wire bed with a cinged mattress sat in the middle. Old paintings hung on smoke stained frames, their canvases pockmarked with burn holes. I let my eyes adjust for a moment, and when I was sure there was nothing else in there I continued down the hallway.

I entered the foyer and looked to my left. A tiny kitchen peared through a half-opened door. In front of me a staircase led to a second floor, but all the bottom stairs had been turned to ash. I looked to my right and a man stood in the doorway holding a large blade. My heart stopped for a moment and then Steven said, "Well? Did you find your boogeyman yet?" I wanted to say he was standing right there, but I just shook my head no and continued forward.

The light from the front door illuminated the flooring in front of me. Black ash covered every inch of the once brown wood floors. The hallway looked like it was carved out of a lump of charcoal. I took a step forward and something caught my eye. In the middle of the floor the ashes looked to be flattened in a straight line that led down the hall. I crouched down to get a better look. The ashes were pushed to the side as if something was dragged through. I looked behind me and the path continued from where I had come. In front of me it rounded a corner into the next room. On each side of the path …

I gasped.

"What is it?!" Steven hissed from the front door. "What do you see?"

"Hand prints," I said and stood up. I brushed the house's ashes from my knees. "Hand prints, Steven. Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There are *hand prints* on the floor! I saw something in here when I was outside, and now I'm seeing hand prints on the floor. If you wanted to scare me you've done it, okay? Now I'm leaving." I walked towards the door, but Steven didn't move.

"It wasn't us," he said. There was a slight tremble in his voice. "No one's been inside. We got her, like, five minutes before you did. We had just set up the lights and keg when you guys…" His voice trailed off.

"Steven?"

He wiped the boxcutter on one pant leg and licked his lips. "We've got to see what it is."

"Are you drunk?!" I shouted.

"Shh!" He stepped into the house and grabbed my elbow. "Let's just *look*." He turned me back towards the path and shoved me forward. In his other hand the blade reflected the little bit of light that braved its way into the house.

I raised my hands and walked quickly to try to put some distance between us. I arrived at the door first and looked down. There was only one blemish on the door frame's white paint; a single black handprint rounded the bottom edge. I took a big breath to steady myself and walked into the room.

The wall opposite of me had one broken window. To the left a black wall with hundreds of burnt photos stapled to it leaned forward, threatening to collapse at any minute. To the right was another wall with more photos, but these seemed to radiate out from two distinct pictures. One was a black and white picture of a wedding. The bottom half was scarred with burn marks, but the top showed a couple seemingly happy. The other picture was of a boy that looked a lot like… Steven.

There was a scratching sound, like furniture being moved. I scanned the room but saw nothing. The ceiling was bubbled and a hole opened up in the center to the second floor. Chunks of plaster and wood lay in the middle of the floor surrounded by charred rope and chains.

“That must be where the fire started,” Steven said over my shoulder.

“I thought I heard something,” I said.

“Me too.” He nudged me forward.

I took one more step into the room and my shoe brushed against something on the floor. I looked down and beside me an arm lay outstretched from behind the remains of a bookshelf. Its skin was scaly and black. Three fingernails were pulled off and the other two were caked in ash, blood, and purple paint. I screamed and tried to pull my foot away but the hand lashed out and grabbed my ankle. There was a low whining sound like that of a cat and a raspy howl. Steven grabbed my shoulders and pulled me backward and I lost my balance. I fell on my butt and kicked at the hand. I looked up to Steven for help but he was retreating into the hallway, staring with his mouth agape at something over my left shoulder.

I turned slowly, following the hand on my shoe to the arm, and the arm to the blackness behind the bookshelf. Another hand creeped out and slid along the wall until it got to the doorframe. It grabbed hold and then pulled. A head covered in black scabs, burns, and patches of red matted hair emerged from the shadows. The head tilted up towards me showing a charred face. Green pus and crusted blood filled holes where skin had fallen away. A black hole separated to show broken teeth. The thing howled again.

The boxcutter fell to the floor beside me as Steven ran for the front door.

I screamed and kicked as the thing climbed its way out and grabbed my thigh. It pulled until it was laying on top of my legs. An engorged stomach rippled and convulsed on my shins. I tried to push it back, but the charred skin sloughed off in my hands. I reached for the boxcutter and the thing used my free arm to pull itself higher until it was face to face with me. I screamed again. It screamed back at me. The boxcutter came down on its shoulder, lodging the the blade all the way up to the handle. The thing howled and recoiled. I got to my feet and ran.

When I got outside everyone was gone. The lights were packed away and only the keg stood out in the yard like the house’s own tombstone. I screamed for Kaitlyn and then a single light turned on blinding me for a moment. I stood, frozen in fear, and then the thing in the house let loose another howl. I ran towards the light, the Oldsmobile’s engine came to life, and I climbed into the backseat.

“Drive!” I screamed.

“What happened?” asked Kaitlyn. She was turned around in the front seat and holding my shoulders. “Steven came out and said something about an animal -”

“Not an animal,” I said. “Something else.”

“What was it?” Bo said into the mirror.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “I want to go home.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” shouted Bo. “Steven was freaking *white* when he came out of that house.”

“I don’t know, okay?!” I yelled back.

“It’s okay,” said Kaitlyn as she stroked my hair. “It’s okay. That’s enough fun for one night.”

Bo tried to say something else, but Kaitlyn shook her head no. He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned colors and drove. As the Cutlass made its way to the main road I turned and looked through the rear window. For a moment I thought I saw something standing in the cove of trees screaming at us.

Bo said later that Steven went to the house when they knocked it down and nothing came out. “Whatever it was died in there,” Steven told Bo.

I don’t believe him.

{L}imbs

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“Did you hear that?” she asks. I pretend I’m asleep and let off a pair of semi-convincing snores into my pillow.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“Ernest! Ernest, did ya hear that?!” She doesn’t shake me, she doesn’t nudge me, the old bat *pokes* me in the back of my head. “Ernest! I know you ain’t sleeping! Did you hear that noise?!”

“Dammit, woman!” I hiss into my pillow. “I don’t hear anything. Now go back to – “

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“There! There it is again!” she shrieks.

“You keep this up and you’re gonna give yourself a heart attack,” I say, but I know I’m not that lucky. Odetta will still be kicking around this side of the dirt long after I’m gone.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

She pokes me again. “Aren’t you going check it out?”

“Now why in the hell would I do that?” I roll over to face her. “It’s probably just the wind rustlin’ them trees out front. Now go back to sleep or at least shut your mouth so I can!”

She opens her mouth to say something, thinks better of it, and then lays her head back down on the pillow with her lips pursed. She’s quiet just long enough for me to slip back into whatever dream I was having.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

She’s shaking me this time. This woman will be the death of me, I think. I open one eye, she’s too damn ugly at night to get two, and lay on my meanest of glares. Her brown skin is practically grey in the near dark room. Fuzz from the tiny tv on the dresser splashes bits of color onto her terrified face. Ah hell, she really is scared. That just means I’m goin’ to have to get up outta this bed and see whatever is causing –

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“That’s it!’ I say and swing my legs out from under the sheets. The cold wood floor makes it feel like winter, but that’s still months away. My knees creak as my back spasms, and together they work against me as I try to stand up. “I’m going to show you it’s just the damn tree branches.” Old bones and joints crack and moan and bind as I hobble over to the window. I put two hands on the curtains to pull them apart when the doorbell rings downstairs.

“Ernest?” Odetta says softly from the bed. There’s a tremble in her voice that makes her sound like a nervous frog.

“You just stay there, woman,” I say, pointing a bony finger at her nose. “You just stay there and keep practicing not talkin’. I’ll go see who’s at the door.” My hands leave the curtain and one reaches for the dresser to keep me upright.

Odetta sees me stumble and says, “Take your cane, you old fool.”

I wave her comment away and make my way down the carpeted stairs. Each one sends searing pain up into my hips. I get halfway down and the doorbell rings again. “That better not be one of you damn kids from across the street!” I yell. Those kids are worse than their yapping mutts. At least the dogs can be put down after a few years. I smile at the thought, and the doorbell rings again. “I’m comin’, I’m comin’. You’ll wear out the damn button before I get there!”

I make it to the landing and cross the few steps to get to the door. I try to look through the peephole but it’s dark outside. “What did I expect,” I say to myself. “It’s the middle of the damn night.” Next to the door a beige light switch is flipped up to the on position. “Light must be out.”

“It *was* working perfectly,” a voice says through the door. It catches me off-guard and I almost lose my balance. I grab the knob to steady myself.

It jiggles from the other side.

“Who’s there?” I croak. Now who sounds like a frog, I think.

“Ah, that’s a loaded question,” the voice replies. I look through the peephole and see nothing. I flip the light switch a few times and then look again. Still nothing.

“Did you break my bulb? ‘Cause that’s destruction of property or something like that, and I got a nephew who’s a lawyer.”

“His mother must be proud,” the voice replies jovially.

“His mother – what?”

“I think we can overcome this confusion if you would just open the door,” the voice said, then added, “Mr Vanderson.”

The knob twists in my hand. I try to squeeze it, try to stop the rotation, but it’s too strong. There’s a click and I see the deadbolt roll back. The door inches open. I let go of the knob and put both hands on the wood. I push and all my joints catch fire with pain. My left arm gives out and I put my shoulder into the door instead. My entire weight is up against the wood, yet it still inches open. Little by little the door swings inward pushing me back into the landing.

“Now, now,” the voice says. “Is that any way to treat a guest?”

The door stops moving. I realize I’ve been closing my eyes. When I open them I see I’ve been pushed back so far my heels rest against the first step. In front of me the door is open and a shadowed figure stands in the threshold.

“Who… who are you?” I whisper.

The figure pulls something from behind its back and raises its hand up above the doorframe. There’s a soft squeaking sound and then blazing white light ignites the porch. In front of me, silhouetted by the light above him, a man stands in my doorway. He’s average height and average size. Even his blue oxford and jeans are average. His smile though…

“Who I am isn’t as important as why I am here,” he says. His voice is a smooth baritone, but there’s also a higher note, like someone sucking helium and talking at the same time.

“Why you’re here? I… I don’t understand.”

“Nor should you,” he laughs. “I haven’t told you yet.”

There’s a barrage of barking behind him. He turns to look across the street and for a split second I feel a bit of courage seep into old bones. I lunge for the door and push it close. The deadbolt snaps closed in my fingers and I put my back to the door for good measure.

“I’m goin’ to call the cops, buddy!” I yell through the door.

“And how will you do that, Mr Vanderson? Your phone is in the kitchen and your back is on this door,” he says. “And if you go to get it who’s going to stop me from paying a visit to…,” there’s a pause.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“Mrs Vanderson?” he laughs. My blood turns to ice.

I’m running up the stairs, actually *running*. I haven’t moved this fast in twenty years. I make it to the top step and my lungs feel like they’re going to burst through my chest. I turn the corner and rush into our bedroom. Odetta is lying in bed, the sheets pulled over her head.

“Stay there!” I yell. “You hear me, woman? Do not go downstairs!”

She doesn’t move as I run to the window.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“There’s some idiot downstairs trying to break in,” I say. “Call the cops, will ya? I’m goin’ to see if he’s still out there.”

I put both hands on the curtains and ready myself to open them. My hands shake.

“Odetta? You hear me?” I turn and she’s still under the sheets.”Will you get off your ass and call the cops?” She doesn’t move. “Can’t depend on a woman in a firefight,” I grumble.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

I fling open the curtains and immediately clutch my chest. My heart stops for what feels like an eternity. Sweat forms on my brow and drops into my eyes. “No…,” I gasp.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

Outside the window the man stands, tapping on the glass with perfectly groomed nails.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

“I want to live here,” he says with a smile that distorts his face. “This is my house now.”

I pull the curtains shut again, but before I do the man tilts his head to the side, as if he’s studying me, and winks one blue eye.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

I rush over to Odetta’s side of the bed and dial 9-1-1. I tell the operator there’s someone outside my house and hang up. I reach over and pat her shoulder. She doesn’t move.

“It’s okay. He’s gone,” I lie. With shaking hands I start to pull the sheet back. Grey hair feathers out on the pillow. “Odetta?” I pull the sheet to her shoulders. Her eyes are closed, there’s a small smile on her face, and her head is twisted around opposite her body. Gnarled and broken arms curl up under her pillow as two droplets of blood fall from the corner of her eye.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

{M}oth

“Coffee?”

The young officer working the door looks at me with half-glazed confusion. “Um, no thanks. Or, um, do you want *me* to get you some, sir?”

I smile and pat him on the shoulder. “Burnt grounds, man. It’s how we label the scenes.” He stares at me and nods, then the nod rolls over into a slow shake. He doesn’t follow. “The smell. If it’s really bad you shove some burnt coffee grounds in your nose or wipe some Vick’s or somethin’ on your top lip.”

The lights click on in his eyes. “Oh, um, no. No, sir. No coffee. It’s, um, it’s – what’s the opposite of coffee?”

My eyebrows rise. “I got a call that this one was pretty brutal.”

“Oh, it is, sir. It… it just doesn’t, um, smell.” He swats at the side of his face as a large *Chytolita morbidalis* flutters by his ear.

“Interesting,” I say and walk into the hotel’s storage room.

The space is small, squarish, with a large cabinet taking up the majority of the left hand side. A cut deadlock is hooked into a latch holding two large doors closed. One single bulb flickers on a frayed line suspended from the center of a seven foot ceiling. I duck to avoid the light and follow the CAPs to the right rear corner. There are no windows, and the room feels overwhelmingly …

“Dry?” a voice says from in front of me.

My mouth sticks, my tongue is swollen and lethargic, as I say, “Yeah, what’s up with that?”

“Some sort of desiccant. Silica gel, it looks like. Lots of it.” The voice belongs to a woman. She stands with a red-striped evidence bag. “You the CSA?”

“*Lead* analyst, actually,” I say and extend a gloved hand. “Max Mcleritin.” She shakes it without saying anything, so I add, “Where’s Georgie?”

“Detective Brown was pulled into another 10-45d outside of Crestwater.” Her radio beeps to life, there’s a second of static and then it cuts out again. “Due to the circumstances I was asked to cover.”

“And you are?” I say coyly. She’s cute, way too uptight, but cute. I throw in a wink for good measure.

“Detective Lafferty.”

Hard to get, I think. I like that. “Do all your friends call you detective?”

“My husband calls me Marcia,” she replies stone-faced.

“Oh,” I say and my flirting dries up like the room I’m in. I turn in a half circle to take in the entire scene. Left side, cabinet. Right side, bare wall. Corners, nothing. Floor, empty concrete. “So where’s the John Doe?”

“We’ll get to that,” she says. She’s watching me, waiting for my initial analysis.

“Alright. No smell means the body is post-decay or sealed. No stains means it was done somewhere else or cleaned *very* thoroughly afterward. Single door, no windows, means there was limited external contamination.” I look around the room again to make sure I didn’t miss something, and then add, “No body means I get to go home and relax.” I smile. She doesn’t.

“Look closer,” she says.

I step forward to the next CAP plate and look at the rear wall and floor. A cracked corner in the concrete opens into a tiny black hole between the floor and wall. There’s a faint trail of powder that leads from the wall, past the metal stepping plate I’m on, and into another hole made by a rotting baseboard in the cabinet behind me.

Detective Lafferty follows my eyes. “The desiccant, I think.” She hands me the baggie.

“Bug trail,” I say and take the baggie. I look at her and then look at the cabinet. “What’s in there?”

Before she can answer her cell phone rings. She puts up one finger and takes the call. “Hello? Yes. He’s here now.” There’s a pause. Her nose

wrinkles in concentration. Definitely cute, I think. She sees me staring and frowns. “Stay here. Don’t touch,” she says to me with her palm over the phone’s mic. She leaves the storage room not before turning on a heel and repeating, “Do not touch anything.”

I nod and watch her leave. I start daydreaming about what she looks like under that pantsuit when something moves to my right side. I turn too quickly and trip off the side of the metal square. I lose my balance and put both hands up on the wood cabinet to steady myself. “Graceful as always,” I chuckle to myself.

The cabinet moves.

I pull my hands away like I’ve just touched a hot stove. “That didn’t just …” I start to say and then the padlock on the cabinet’s front latch jiggles. I jump back up onto the stepping plate and look to the storage room door. The back of the young officer is towards me and hot Detective Lafferty is nowhere in sight. “Nothin’ in there, Max,” I say to myself.

I remember the bug trail.

Definitely somethin’ in there, Max. My curiosity is piqued. I shoot a glance back to the officer. He’s staring out into the parking lot, lost in his own thoughts. I listen for Detective Lafferty and I can hear her muffled conversation on the other side of the wall. “If you’re going to do it, best be doin’ it now,” I say to myself. I step off the metal plate gingerly and place both hands on the cabinet. It doesn’t move. “Of course it’s not goin’ to move, you idiot –“

There’s a ripple of vibration that starts at the base of the cabinet and then worms its way up and past my hands. When my heart starts beating again I take a deep breath and put my ear to the door. It’s silent for a long time and then…

Scratching.

I pull my head away from the wood and place a trembling hand around the lock. Looking at the officer through the doorway I remove the lock and slide the latch back. It squeaks, but he doesn’t turn around. With the latch unhooked the door presses outward. I hold it shut with my hands and steady my nerves. The whole cabinet is humming with movement. I try to lick my lips but all moisture has been sucked from my tongue. I say a silent prayer and pull open the doors.

I’m knocked backward, trip over the CAP plate, and go sprawling on my butt against the opposite wall. A silent swarm of white attacks my face and beats at my hair. I’m blinded by a flurry of wings and black eyes. I try to stand but trip again and my head hits the light bulb. It starts swinging in a spastic manner and half the swarm traces it back and forth, back and forth. I swat at the others as they batter my face. I force a hand over my mouth as a few of them manage to fly in and get caught in my throat. I’m choking, gagging on them, as more are crushed between my teeth. Wings pelt my eyes so I squeeze them shut. A few hammer at the sides of my head and as I slap their bodies away, their heads detach inside my ears. I’m blind and deaf and choking on their bodies. And then it stops.

The whole swarm changes direction, pulls away from me and careens into a crack in the ceiling above the cabinet. They beat at the plaster until it opens wider and then all tumble through the hole in a rolling wave of white wings. I watch them leave and then my eyes follow the few lingerers back to the cabinet. The doors are open. Vomit wells up in my throat.

Inside the cabinet is a corkboard. Pinned to the board with crooked nails are the remains of a man. His arms are separated at the shoulder and pulled away three inches. They’re mounted next to the torso in a T pose. The skin is flayed from wrist to biceps, stretched out, and stapled to the board. The man’s head lolls forward on a neck so dry it looks like parchment. The neck opens up to a naked torso. Its skin has been split down the middle and pulled out like wings to the side. It’s stapled in the same manner as the arms. The legs are bisected at the hip and mounted to the board perpendicular to the torso. The skin is flayed and both femurs are missing. The placement of the arms, legs, and skin gives the man a distinct insect-like appearance, like he’s been pinned to a board for a collector. A handful of white moths flutter about the body occasionally coming down to rest on the dried skin like snowflakes on a dead tree.

My knees unhinge and I feel myself go lightheaded. I put both hands on the doors and close them, trapping both the man and moths inside.

“What the hell are you doing?” Detective Lafferty says from the door.

I jump clear out of my skin.

“I, uh, I thought I heard somethin’.”

She steps into the room and grabs the swaying light, forcing it to steady. “I told you not to touch anything.” Then, when seeing my face, “Are you okay?”

I push my way past her and run out into the parking lot. The young officer calls after me as I vomit in the middle of the road. I raise hand to keep him away. I look through my legs and see Detective Lafferty walking towards me. I stand up, pull the back of my hand across my mouth and yell, “I’m fine! Just had some bad eggs for breakfast.”

“Right,” she says. “Come back when you’re ready.”

I spit out the last bit of bile and turn back towards the Inn. The young cop looks at me with worried eyes. “Turns out it was worse than a coffee gig,” I say with a smile. “I’m going to get some gum.” He nods and resumes his surveillance of the parking lot.

I walk over to my car, an old Crown Vic I got for a steal at the last cop’s auction, and climb into the driver’s seat. I lean over, flip open the glove box, and pull out a pack of Wrigley’s and a flask. After a long swig I pop in a piece of gum and check out my reflection in the rearview mirror. A few bags under my eyes and some grey hairs, but not too bad. And then a shadow moves behind me.

“He’s going to help us,” it says in a trembling voice. “But we have to give him what he needs.”

I turn in my seat, my heart pounding in my ears. “Dad?”

{N}eighbor

Mother Nature is bipolar. Or, like I told my mom when she hung the winter wreath on the door at the very same time my dad was doing yard work in sandals, Mother Nature is most def a chick. You can't be hot one day, snow the next, and then decide you're going to be a little bit of both on the weekend.

We went full pads today, fourth time this week, and I'm pretty certain we're going to be doing sled work every day until I graduate. I don't really mind, I mean quarterbacks don't get hit, but still, I kinda feel bad for everyone else. After the Crestwater game you'd think the coaches were actually punishing us. Whatever. It's not like any of us are good enough for D1 next year. Don't tell my dad, though. He'd have a cranial if I told him I didn't wanna play ball at State.

The phone rings.

"'Sup?"

"You hear about your hot goth neighbor?"

"She show up in your dreams again, dude?" He gets a rager whenever he sees Mrs. Reynolds. "I'm gonna tell your girlfriend," I tease.

"Tara's the one who told me." There's a pause. It takes me a second to notice there's no humor in his voice. He sounds so… serious.

"What's up?" I put my half finished Gatorade down on the porch and switch the phone to my right ear.

Another pause. I can hear him breathing. "Um, Tara heard her dad talkin' and apparently they found her husband Mr. Reynolds – "

"That wasn't his last name," I correct.

"What?"

"Your Wednesday Addams kept her daddy's name, because of the business or something."

"Oh, Cassie never told me that," he mumbles. "That doesn't really matter. Anyway, Tara heard her dad say they found him dead in their garage, leaning up against that shitty black Gremlin. Totally gutted."

"The car or the dude?"

"The dude," he says.

"Whoa."

"I know," he says. "I mean he seemed like a good guy, right? Always waved and stuff."

"Didn't say anything about seeing us over at Mcleritin's place…"

"Right."

"That sucks."

The phone is silent for a full minute.

"Dude?" Chad asks. "Do you think it was –?"

"No!" I interrupt. "And don't even fucking think that."

"Ok, I mean… Tara's dad said there was black ash everywhere and Steven said –"

I think of her and my blood boils. "I don't give a shit what your brother said," I shout. "There's no way –" A small yellow U-haul truck pulls into the driveway across the street. Brakes squeak and hinges protest as it comes to a stop. "Whoa." At the same time the driver door swings open the sun decides to push its way through a soggy pair of grey clouds. The house across the street is cast into a backlit shadow as a man, I think it's a man, hops out of the cab and lets himself through the front door.

Chad is talking into the phone, but I don't pay any attention until I hear him say, "And he's been grounded since the party."

“What?”

“I said Steven’s been grounded since the party so…”

“Good. Your brother’s a douchebag.”

“But the dance,” he says. “What we saw...”

“Bigger fish right now, dude,” I say and stand. “Someone’s moving into the old Vanderson place.”

“Is she cute?”

I don’t respond. The front door of the house swings open and a figure walks out onto the porch. I turn sideways behind a railing and hold my breath. I don’t know why I’m hiding, but now that I am it feels pretty freakin’ silly.

“She’s cute isn’t she?” The phone says from my side. I raise it up to my ear. “You always get the hot neighbors.”

“It’s a dude,” I say.

“Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know.” The clouds reassert their position in front of the sun and the Vanderson’s house is cast into a monochrome fog. The figure turns and shuts the door behind them, and I use that opportunity to run inside my house and look through the blinds on the front window.

“What’s goin’ on?”

“He’s… he’s just standing there,” I say.

“Whatcha doin’?” a tiny voice says from behind me.

I jump, my face gets caught in the blinds, and I flail onto the floor. My phone tumbles under a chair. I stand up quickly and try to pass it off like nothing happened. I check the window. Across the street the figure is a shadowed silhouette except for a wide white smile with too many teeth. I feel the skin on my neck rolling and twitching in agitated spasms and then she pulls my hand.

“Who are you looking at? Did Mr. Vanderson come home?”

I turn and look at Becky. One lopsided pigtail sprouts from the right side of her head and falls into her face. She keeps blowing it out of her eyes and it keeps flopping back into them. A fat bulldog struggles in her arms, and then finally gives up and stares at me with wet eyes. A sloppy tongue lolls out of his mouth and occasionally licks her arm. She buries her nose in the scruff his neck and makes a kissing sound.

“I don’t think Wrinkles likes that,” I say and begin redoing her hair.

“Of course he does. Don’t you Wrinkles?” The dog lets out an exasperated pant. “See?!”

I cinch down the hair tie and pat Wrinkles on the head. “Sorry, buddy. She’s the boss.” He pants harder at me.

“Who’s that?” Becky says and points a tiny finger over my shoulder.

I turn to look and nearly jump out of my skin. There’s a man standing at my front window. His back is to us and he keeps swaying side to side like he’s moving with the wind. He looks normal in a blue shirt and jeans. A familiar strap crosses his back and connects to something that rests under his left arm. There’s something off about him; the way he moves is like staring at a funhouse mirror. I put my finger to my lips and motion Becky to leave. She refuses so I grab her arm and begin pulling her out of the room.

Click Click Scraaaaatch

I whip my head back around and the man is still standing there gently rocking in front of the window. His ears are pulled back like he’s smiling, but I can’t see his face. He’s tapping the glass with one of his fingernails.

The dog lets out a low growl. “I don’t think Wrinkles likes him,” Becky says and kisses the dog’s head again.

“Go find dad,” I say. “Or mom. Just go.”

Becky stomps off towards the kitchen. I watch her go until she disappears around the corner. I try to steady my heart as I turn around, but it stops completely. The man is gone. I run to the window and scan the porch. He’s not there. I look out into our driveway and front lawn, but

see no sign of him. I look over to the Vanderson's and…

He's standing on their porch, a shapeless black figure melting into the shapeless black darkness, only a twisted Cheshire smile glowing from the shadows.

I can feel my stomach turning, the Gatorade forcing its way back up my throat. I swallow it back down when I hear, "Dude? Yo, Derek, you okay, man?"

I look around the room and see my phone under the chair. Dropping to my hands and knees I reach between the legs until my shoulder nudges the bottom cushion. I feel the rectangular brick, pull it out and press it to my ear. "Camera," I hiss. "He's got her –"

Movement out of the corner of my eye. I drop the phone. Blood gushes from my mouth as I clamp my teeth shut on my tongue to suppress a scream. My eyes water and I feel my bladder let loose.

He's standing at my window, hands cupped around his eyes, and staring through the glass. I can't tell if he sees me sprawled out on the floor, but I can see clearly that he's smiling. His face looks like it's melting upwards, like he's constantly in a wind tunnel. A split tongue darts out between sharpened rows of teeth and wets thin lips. A pointed adam's apple darts up and down a long neck.

I push myself into the floor, wishing myself invisible.

He taps on the glass.

"Derek?" the phone in my hand yells. "Who has a camera?! Derek?!"

I pull the phone to my ear and cup the mic. "Shhh!" I hiss.

"Shhh…," the man at the window repeats.

I squeeze my eyes shut as tears rip from the corners. A scream bludgeons the back of my throat, clawing to get out. I hold my breath for what seems like an eternity.

"Shhh…" I hear him say again.

I open my eyes and he's gone. Moisture from where his hands were pressed evaporates from the window. I push myself to my knees and look out into the front yard. Nothing.

"Derek?" Chad yells from the phone.

I rise on unsteady legs and lean my back to the window. My heart flutters at random rhythms. "He's got her camera," I croak with a voice nearly too scared to come out.

"Who does?" Chad asks. "Whose camera?"

"The neighbor," I say.

"The neighbor," a voice repeats from the other side of the glass.

I spin on a heel and trip over myself. The man is there, a blue eye and a brown eye staring through the glass and *through* me. The smile on his face widens until it stretches into a sickening grin.

I scream and fall backwards.

I blink.

He's gone.

I blink again.

Still gone.

I squeeze my eyes shut until red blossoms bloom in my eyelids and then slowly open the lids.

Definitely gone.

I clamor to my feet and stumble to the window. I look left, nothing; look right, nothing; look across the street, and he's there again. He floats

on feet that don't move backwards through a door that opens for him.

My arm feels asleep as I raise it to my face. "Get Tara," I say into the phone. "I'm coming over."

"But what about Steven?" Chad says.

"I don't care. I'm coming over!"

I grab my coat and tell my mom I'm going to Chad's for the weekend. As I walk out into the late day's warm sunlight the house across the street sits in a wintery gloom. Mother Nature isn't bipolar, I think. She just knows something I don't.

{O}xazepam

The world is tipping, or topping, or maybe it's tip-topping down on itself. Hell, I don't know. All I can tell is it's spinning like a Ferris wheel and I gotta hold onto the side of this building to keep from falling – oh look, a tiny little flying white bug. Hello, pretty bug –

"What are you doing?"

"I'm pissin'. Can't you see that?" But I'm not pissing. I'm done. Been done for awhile. I just spaced and forgot to zip up, and he's still staring at me. "What are you staring at, op-fficer?" Oops. That came out a little drunk. Lemme try that again, "Staring at me for what now, buddy, are you?"

This isn't going too well. I hiccup, fart, and try not to laugh.

"Is your room around here?" he asks.

I shake my head no. "Yes," I say.

"Can you make it there on your own?"

I shake my head yes, and this time say yes. I give myself a thumbs up, lose my balance, and stagger against the wall. "Did you, did you just push me, man?"

"No."

"Oh." I look up and down the side of the building. "I coulda sworn somebody just – hey, are you really a cop? Cops wear guns. And badges! Like, silver stars. Not copper stars anymore. Copper! You know that's why you're called a cop?" I'm rambling, but my mouth stopped listening to my brain awhile ago. "I saw that on a tv show." I smile at him. His flashlight still shines in my face. When did he get a flashlight -?

"Are you meeting someone?"

I think about the answer and then get confused by the question. I try to shake my head yes and no at the same time and make myself dizzy. I lean my back against the wall and feel warm air on my crotch. "Oops!" I say, but it comes out like a wet belch. I'm fumbling with my zipper, but every time I look down the ground swims away from me. "I – I think I have vertigo." I teeter forwards and almost fall. He catches my shoulder with one hand. "You've got pretty nails," I blurt. "I mean, for a guy cop and all."

"Do you have any family?"

"That's a – that's a weird question to be askin' somebody, dontcha think?" I poke him in his stupid blue chest with my finger.

"No."

"Oh," I say. "Good point." I manage to pull the zipper halfway up. Close enough. "I got a brother. And a mom." I scratch my head. "I got a dad too, but I never met him." I look up at him but that dumb light is in my eyes. "I met him, maybe. But I don't remember. He died." I'm falling forward again. I never realized how hard standing upright really is. "He died eating pie. Isn't that funny?"

"No."

"Well – well maybe *you* just don't have a sense of hummer. Humor." I'm laughing. "I said hummer, didn't I?"

The inn's neon street sign is fading like it's being pulled out into the horizon on the back of a bus.

"I was on a bus today," I say. I hear a scraping sound at my feet, but don't look. S'no good looking at this point. The earth doesn't want to be seen. Swims away and away and away. I catch myself doing the breaststroke with my arms. "Sammy's the swimmer. When we were little we both fell into a pool. Sammy swam over and pulled me out. He was only 3 or 4 or maybe we were 10. I don't know." I try to scratch my head but my arm is being stubborn. "I have a feeling my body doesn't like me anymore." I laugh but it pinches in my chest. A bright star shoots through the sky and comes to rest in a dark square in front of us. "Did you see that?"

I blink. The star becomes a light bulb. It was always a light bulb. It's a light bulb in a room. It gets bigger and bigger, or – "Am I floating?"

The scraping stops. The light bulb doesn't move.

"That's not the only time Sammy saved me from drownin', you know." My tongue is thick and it takes a lot of effort to talk. "Been sober for

fifteen years now. I got the coin and everything." I try to dig it out of my pocket but my arms are still being rude. "Do – do ya mind helpin' me out." I turn my head and see the man holding me up by my armpit. "Thanks." I turn my head to the second man holding my other arm. "Thanks," I say. My chin droops forward and I feel myself droolin'. I look back to the first man. "Your friend doesn't talk much, does he?"

The scraping sound starts again. The light bulb gets closer.

"He sells the stuff but won't touch it. A bartender that doesn't drink, like a cop who's not a cop. Like you," I say. Or think. Probably think. My mouth isn't listening to me anymore. "You're just a guy in a shirt." My eyelids are heavy. I want to say I'm sleepy. I want to tell the men to drop me off at my room, but I'm sitting now. Sitting in a dark room with a big cabinet at my back. A dark room on a concrete floor and it's so dry in here.

My eyelids are heavy.

"I don't drink anymore," I try to say, but it slips through cracking lips as "I don tink tanymor." My eyelids flutter. The light bulb star dangles on a string to heaven. White angels float around the glowing orb. "Do you see the angels?" I ask shocking myself a little with the clarity.

"Every day," the first man says with a laugh.

The other man is crouched down in front of me. He's pulling off my shoes. "You don't have to do that," I think at him. "I've slept in my boots before."

His eyes are wet. He's very old. I recognize him.

A smile tugs at my lips. "Can I have another glass of water?" I ask.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"S'okay," I mumble. He was nice enough to give me the first glass when I met him in the parking lot. Can't go moochin' off of everybody.

The other man pours a cup of nails into my lap.

"I can't," the old man says.

"Can't what?" I try to say, but it's so damn dry in here. Feels like I'm chewin' on chalk. The little angels are dancing closer now.

The first man crouches down and pulls off my shirt. He smells like iron and dust. He puts his face inches from mine. One eye is the color of the pool I fell into as kid. The other eye is the color of the drink I fell into as an adult. Pursed lips separate into a smile that grows, catching waves of skin in thick folds of red splotched dermis. His head tilts like he's studying me as his cheeks stretch up and past his ears. He leans in closer and puts his face next to mine.

"Angels don't have wings," he whispers into my ear; his lips brush the edge of my skin. "But *you* will."

{P}ie

“Oh honey, you know I can’t tell you that.” I close the glass on the three tiered carousel and wipe away my fingerprints with a rag.

He leans over the counter and gives me his biggest grin. If it wasn’t for the three missing teeth he might almost be cute. “Reba,” he says. “You got me comin’ back here day in and day out. How many years it been?”

“Too many,” I say with a wink. I smooth down my apron, the same one my momma wore, and try to cover the last remaining mound of my ever receding baby bump.

“Now don’t go playin’. You loved every minute of it.”

I laugh and pull his tab. He slaps down a five and two ones; the same as every other day.

“Just the crust then. Will ya? Just give me the recipe for the crust and I’ll go on my way.”

“Well,” I say and scratch my temple with a pencil’s eraser. “How about you come in for another few years and I’ll tell ya then.”

He grins the same goofy grin he gives every day when I tell him that line, tips his hat and walks towards the exit. He turns backwards as he pushes through the door and says, “Reba Yerner, if you wasn’t married I’d take you home with me.”

“Mr. Marshall, if I wasn’t married, I might just let you try.” We wave at each other and then he’s gone out into the early afternoon sun.

The diner’s practically empty now. A couple sits in a corner booth sharing an order of fries, looking out the window, and making those silly kissy faces newlyweds still know how to make. The young dentist is at the end of the bar picking through the last crumbs of his chicken and waffles, and a trio of strangers sit at the large round table by the jukebox. The hairs stand at the back of my neck when I see them.

“Take a picture it’ll last longer,” Odetta says from behind me.

“I wasn’t starin’,” I protest.

“Sure you were. I had to say that twice before you even acknowledged me. You thinkin’ about Francis and the boys?”

“No,” I shake my head. The world seems foggy for a second and then my head clears. I turn away from the large round and motion at it with my head. “Just strange to see one guy out with two girls, right?”

Odetta laughs. “Honey, you’ve got a dirty mind. One of them is his daughter.”

I turn around slowly and take a quick look. “Which one? They look like twins.”

“Beats me.”

The man in the blue shirt at the table looks up from his hamburger and tilts his head as if he’s studying me. I turn back to Odetta. “He’s creepy.”

“Yep,” she says. “And a horrible tipper.” She smiles and pats my arm. “Don’t worry, he’s cashed out.” I nod. “Ernest is waitin’ outside. You good?” I nod again. “Good. I’ll see you in the mornin’.” She gets up on tiptoes and kisses my cheek. She starts walking to the door and just as she reaches it two young men barge through.

“’Scuse me, ma’am,” the thin one says.

“Move it,” the other one says and puts a shoulder into her.

“Well screw you, fatty,” Odetta says and pushes her way outside. The man’s face turns a bright shade of crimson that doesn’t even begin to subside until the two are sitting at the bar in front of me.

“What can I get you two?” I ask, trying and failing to not sound annoyed.

The thin one’s eyes soften as he looks from what could only be his brother to me. “What’s good today?” he asks. Thick ropes of muscle ripple under a rolled flannel shirt as he picks up the menu.

“Well that depends on how hungry you are.”

“10 hours in the heat and I’m liable to eat everything in your kitchen,” he laughs.

“Well then burgers and fries it is.” I take his menu with a smile. I recognize him now. He always sits in the back booth with his brother, and I can see why he hides him away. The other one has his arms folded on the counter and is leering at the booth where the newlyweds sit. “And what about you? Would you like some pie or somethin’?” I feel the brother to my right stiffen.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” the mean one shouts uncoiling from the bar and slapping two baby-soft hands on the counter.

“Jon, relax,” the other one says.

“Relax?! This bitch just called me fat!”

“I did no such thing,” I say and then my voice is stopped dead in my throat. Out of nowhere the blue-shirted man appears between the two young men. He puts a hand on Jon’s shoulder, leans in, and whispers something in his ear.

“What’s the big idea,” the other brother says, and the blue-shirted man presses an index finger into his forehead. The nice brother flops back into his seat with a blank look on his face; like he’s sleeping with his eyes open.

I’m about to turn and get the cook when the creepy guy tilts his head in that weird way and says, “You’ll have to forgive my friend here. He’s liable to act a bit rude when he hasn’t eaten. Isn’t that right, Jon?” He takes the hand that’s on Jon’s shoulder, places it on top of Jon’s head, and nods it forward and back, forward and back. Jon just stares with a blank look identical to his brother’s. “Why don’t you do us all a favor and go back and start that order? I promise you’ll see a changed man when you come back.”

“Mister, I don’t know you from Adam, but you shouldn’t be –“

“Ah, but my name is Mr. Daeva,” he says, a smile widening on his face. “But my friends call me Cain.”

“Okay, Cain, I don’t –“

His eyes flair, the creases in his cheeks create mile-long ridges. “I said *my friends* call me Cain.”

"Listen, Mr Whoever-the-hell-you-are, that man ain't the nicest in the diner, but it don't mean you need to be doing some kind of voodoo on these young boys."

The man in the blue shirt cackles. His mouth opens and seems to melt upwards into his eyes.

"Is there a problem?" The man from the corner booth has come up to the counter. He's long and lanky and looks much older than he probably is. He tries to inflate his chest. "Because if there is..." His voice trails off as Mr. Daeva uses his hand to turn Jon's head to face the newcomer.

"No problems. At least not currently," the creepy man says, using his free hand to work Jon's jaw like a puppeteer. "But give me a few minutes and I'll see what I can stir up." That smile grows even more. My stomach turns in on itself and I feel my palms sweating.

There's a clang at the front of the diner as the door swings closed. I look up briefly to see my husband standing a few feet away.

"Everything okay, Reba?" Francis asks.

Mr. Daeva gives Francis a long appraisal and then in an instant his smile is gone. He turns back to Jon, places something in his breast pocket, and whispers into his ear. The lights flicker deep inside Jon's eyes. "I was just leaving," Mr. Daeva says to Francis.

"Good," the newlywed says stepping in front of Francis.

Mr. Daeva turns towards the back table and yells, "Greta, we are no longer welcome in this fine establishment." He winks at the brunettes. "Might be time we moved along." The one named Greta stands to leave as the other crosses her arms at the table.

"But daddy," she pouts.

"We'll be back," Greta says and pats her arm.

"That's right, dear," Mr Daeva says. "Listen to your mother." He looks back at me, his stare makes my eyes water. "We'll definitely be back."

The three walk out into the parking lot. No one in the diner makes a sound until the door clangs shut again.

"What was that all about?" Francis asks.

"I don't know -"

"Burgers sound fine," the brother on the right says suddenly. He's shaking his head like there are cobwebs in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask. He grins sheepishly. "Of course. Long day. Must've nodded off for a bit. Sorry 'bout that."

His brother Jon looks up from his crossed arms, there is something off about his eyes. "Y'know what," he says loud enough for everyone to hear. "I feel like an ass for the way I acted. Let me buy everyone a slice of pie."

"Sounds good to me," the lanky newlywed says and offers Jon his hand. "I'm Ian."

Jon shakes with a weak grip and looks at me. "Can you put that order in for the burgers first?" And then, almost painfully, adds, "Please?"

I say of course and write down the order. I disappear into the back for a minute to give their order to the cook and when I come back out Ian is back in the booth with his wife, Jon is brooding into his arms again, and Francis is in deep conversation with the nicer brother.

Francis looks up at me and smile. "Did you know Cal here laid the brick on the Reynolds' new place." I shake my head no, and Francis pokes Cal on the shoulder. "Tell Reba what you guys put in. Go ahead, tell her."

"A furnace," he says with slight embarrassment.

"That's interesting," I lie.

"Tell her what kind of furnace," Francis says.

"It's a, um… it's -"

"We'll take that pie now," Jon interrupts. Cal glares at him but Jon keeps staring into his arms.

"Aren't you gonna wait for your burgers?" I ask.

"Nope. Strawberry. The one on the top." He points to the carousel without looking.

I walk over to it, and pull open the door, but before I do I wipe off a few fingerprints on the glass. "Strawberry it is," I say taking it out of the case and laying it on the counter. "Who wants a piece?"

"I do!" Ian's wife says from the booth.

"None for me, thank you," says Ian. "Allergic to strawberries." Jon turns his head and glowers at him. "How about you, doc?" I ask the dentist who seems completely absorbed by the newspaper. He shakes his head no.

I cut out one piece and take it over to the booth. "Here you go, honey," I say and the young girl takes the plate from my hands.

"Ah hell, I can't pass up free pie!" I hear Francis say behind me. When I turn around he's got half a plate full of strawberries and crust.

"That's it?" Jon shouts. "A man offers up free food and you all turn it down?! What about you?!" He turns on his brother.

"Easy Jon, I'll have a piece after the burgers."

"No, you have to eat it now!" Jon yells.

"Too late," says Francis in a spray of crumbs. "Pie's gone."

With that Jon stands up from his barstool and storms out of the building.

"I guess we'll be taking those burgers to go," Cal says to me.

Francis pulls me aside and says, "I'm going to use the phone outside and check on Sammy and Bobby. They were starting to fuss when I left."

I say okay and watch him leave. I'm just about to walk into the back to box up the order when I hear a wet cough from the corner booth. There's silence again and then another cough, this one sounding like someone about to get sick. I turn and look and see Ian facing me in the booth, his face is a mask of panic. There's another cough and then a fountain of white frothy vomit cascades across the table and into his lap. "Help?"

The words are barely out of his mouth and I'm at the table. His wife has turned blue. She's choking on her own vomit at the same time she's convulsing and writhing on her side in the booth. I try to pull her upright but she twists and squirms out of my arms. Her eyes are rolled to the back of her head and a steady stream of blood is pouring from the corner of her mouth. "Doc, help!" I scream.

The little man runs over, sees the commotion and raises his hands. "I can't," he says. "I'm only a dentist!"

I look over the table and out the window for Francis but don't see him. I turn back to Cal but he's staring back and forth from the booth to the door and sobbing.

"I don't know what to do!" I scream. I put two fingers into the woman's mouth and fish around looking for any food that may be caught. Her throat spasms and a flood of blood and bile pour onto my chest. She kicks back away from me and her head hits the window with a loud crack. I back away nearly dripping over the dentist.

On the other side of the window stand the three people from earlier. All of them tilt their heads and smile. The man in the blue shirt leans forward and licks the glass.

"I … I think she's dead," whimpers Ian.

I look down and his wife is not moving. The dentist is crying beside me. Cal is gone. And Francis…

"Oh my god," I say and run to the parking lot.

{Q}ueen

The thing they get wrong in, like, *every* movie is that montage where the dorky girl gets her hair done, slaps on some makeup, slips into the absolute perfect dress, and then, BOOM, she's the homecoming queen and everyone wants to be her friend. What they don't show is the hours of her convincing her dad to not buy the dress that's on clearance because, Christ, it's *on* sale because no one wants it anymore. Or, when she finally gets to try on a dress she actually likes her dad's all, "No Tara, it's too short," or, "You can't show that much boobies." Boobies? I'm seventeen. That's practically old enough to, like, vote and smoke and shoot guns. I thought this was America! Then, when I finally get a dress that's a compromise between *Sixteen Candles* and *Shrek 2* he takes me to the counter at some discount mall department store to an old grandma who wants to give me a facial, but I can't stop laughing because she *constantly* says the word facial. And then the movies want you believe that the girl sits in her huuuge walk-in closet surrounded by candles and friends as she waits for her date to ring the doorbell with roses, but in reality I'm constantly running from a little terror and his paintball gun until I'm covered in sweat and then have to sit in the backseat with my brother and my date in my dad's cop car as he drives *under* the speed limit to the school where he's going to chaperone! Gah!

But, I mean, that wasn't the worst thing that happened, right? It's not like the night turned into some cheesy *Carrie* rip-off. No pig's blood, not telekinesis; although that would've been pretty awesome when Derek and Steven decided to go at it. No, it was, I don't know, it was just… sad.

Chad showed up three minutes early. I could see him out my front window checking his teeth in the rearview mirror and smelling his breath. It was cute. I had been with him at the hospital after the game, so the crutches didn't surprise me, but there was a huge red welt that stretched from under his jaw and up to his chin. I knew he wouldn't tell me what happened, and he knew I wouldn't ask. After that day at the cabin we both agreed to just ignore it the best we could.

He teetered on one leg, rang my doorbell, and was promptly shot in the ass with a blue paintball.

"Tyler!" my dad yelled. "Not in the house!"

"But he's outside," my little brother protested behind a mask he probably wouldn't fit into for another 3 years.

"He's, um, got a point, sir," Chad said rubbing one cheek and extending a blue hand to my father.

My dad just looked at him and then shouted up the stairs, "Tara! Your friend's here!"

"I'm right here, dad," I said from behind the front room curtain. "Jeez." I tried to look elegant and sexy as I walked into the foyer but failed at both as I tripped over an errant boot and crashed into Chad's chest. We toppled over, laughed, and then immediately blushed as we realized there was now a huge blue handprint on my right boob.

"Car. Now," my dad barked. I'm pretty sure his hand went to his hip. If his gun were there I might have been going stag that night.

We sat in the backseat the entire way to school listening to my dad's radio chirp codes and numbers and whispers of all the fun or trouble the rest of the town was getting into. Tyler sat between us doing his best Darth Vader impression and every once in awhile I'd catch Chad checking me out just to see him be caught by my dad in the rearview mirror. He'd turn bright red and stare out the window like somehow this shitty town was interesting again.

We got to the dance and had to wait until officer dad opened the back doors for us. "For your protection," he said as he kissed my cheek. It's weird how someone can be so overprotective yet so… I don't know… heart-melty at the same time. It's like he's some PI out of a Scorsese movie *and* the perfect family dad out of an overly-colorized Disney cartoon. It's impossible to be mad at him.

But it's *not* impossible to get him mad at me. It's, like, the ingrained skill of every high school girl. And I knew without looking that as soon as I grabbed Chad's hand and led him hobbling awkwardly on crutches into the school's gymnasium – which by the way was decked out in a nautical theme. Barf. – that my dad would be turning fifty shades of angry.

So we're in the gym standing around the freethrow line thing, and there's this awful DJ playing remixes of songs you'd hear on the pop station and of course every girl is dancing around the center court bobcat logo like they accidentally left their pole at home. "This is dumb," I said to Chad. He nods. Of course he nods. He didn't actually hear me. With the amount of flesh being flashed in front of him by girls without daddy's all the blood has left his brain. At least he's not drooling like Derek. And Derek is practically dry-humping the air. Chad sees him and waves. Derek waves back and then does some weird spin robot dance walk to maneuver his way towards us.

"How's the leg?"

"It's fine," Chad lies and puts some weight on it. His face instantly turns white with pain. Derek shoots me a look of concern.

“Let’s go sit down and watch the,” I motion towards the girls doing what could only be a quite accurate portrayal of a backhoe mimicking a drunken mule. “Whatever the hell that is.”

We sit and point and laugh and at a random moment between songs by former Disney pop starlets Chad leans in and kisses my cheek. Now I’m thinking he’s all heart-melty too and then I’m comparing him to my father in a non-I-need-therapy sort of way, while fifty girls in fifty dresses designed for fifty *other* girls of a completely different shape and size grind and thrust to a song about booties and popping. I give Chad my best Molly Ringwald pout and he reciprocates with a partially veiled grimace as the welt on his neck seems to expand and throb. The DJ keeps playing music used in foreign countries as a torture device, and overall it is the most perfect evening.

And then the lights go out.

Now I know what you’re thinking. Lights go out means something creepy is going to happen. And you’re kind of right. I mean, if you’ve ever seen a parade of clowns dressed in pink and crimson retro-dresses dancing in a slow strobe to the deep wub wub wub of whatever the hell techno song is popular now, you know it can be a little unsettling. But this was pretty funny. Contorted faces of dance-induced faux-gasms frozen with each flashing light. Some girl even decided to try and battle dance but it just looked like she was stirring a bowl of really sticky red batter. I was laughing until the little bit of mascara I had left from my early-afternoon facial started to run down my cheeks, then I thought of the word facial and laughed some more. I must have sounded like a dying ox because Derek left, and when I could finally catch my breath Chad was looking at me with obvious worry.

“You know when Dumbo was hallucinating?” I try to shout to him over a disjointed breakbeat. I point at the dance floor. “That!” I laugh some more.

“Are you okay?” he shouts back to me, pointing at my face. The welt on the side of his neck seems to glisten a faint maroon.

“I’m fine,” I yell. I point at the dance floor. “They’re just ridic –“ The word freezes like a wet lump in my throat. Standing in the middle of the basketball court parting the waves of oblivious dancers like a twisted Moses is a naked person wearing a black mask. He’s dripping in liquid, and then the lights are out again, and just like that he’s gone. “Did you see that?!” I yell.

“What?” Chad follows my finger out into the sea of classmates. The strobe continues to flash. “Dumbo?”

“What?! No, not… nevermind.” I shake my head.

“Tara, are you okay?” He’s staring at me. “Your face is…”

“It’s what?” I ask and bring my fingers to my cheek. “It’s just mascara. I was laughing so hard I was crying –“ I look at my fingers. They’re red. My head spins back around to the dance floor. The music has sped up and everyone is in a sort of hopping frenzy. Hands shoot every which way as the strobe continues to flare every half second. Sitting on the floor in the middle of it all is a naked man. A naked man in a mask. A naked man in a mask, covered in blood, and staring at me.

“Holy shit,” I hear Chad say. “Is that –?”

“I don’t know.”

And then the screaming starts. In mid-dance someone bumps into him, looks down, and screams. Someone else follows the path of the scream and comes up on the naked man as well and they scream. The chain reaction explodes out from the center until the entire gym is a cacophony of dance music and terror. Everyone runs in opposite directions of everyone else which leads to a dozen shattered noses and quite a few tangled dresses and broken heels.

The man stands, points something small and silver at us, and then runs through the crowd towards the locker rooms. I go to chase him but Chad grabs my hand. “Stop!” he yells. “Let him go.” The DJ seems to catch on to the frenzy and cuts the music but leaves on the strobe. The room subsides into a gentle roar of whimpers, crying and the occasional wail.

Then the main door swings open, the overhead lights flip on and the screams erupt once again.

The rafters are lined with rope. Six ropes cross the gym horizontally and each one has eleven knots. Tied to each knot are the tails of cats whose skin has been pulled from the base of the tail out over the tops of their heads. Puddles of browning blood dot the floor directly below each animal. I look up to a calico dangling 15 feet above me, its blood drips down and leaves a ringed crown on my head.

“Tara!” my father screams from the door.

I run to him, burying my face in his chest. Chad hobbles after me. Before he can reach us my dad points a finger at him. “Stop,” he says. “You have a metric shit-ton of explaining to do.”

“I … I … I don’t understand,” Chad stutters.

My father gently moves me to the side and grabs Chad by the back of his neck and practically drags him out into the hallway. “What happened in there?” he growls.

“Somebody strung up a bunch of dead cats, dad,” I try to intervene. “There was some naked guy. I couldn’t tell who it was.”

He pushes Chad up against a wall, his crutches flop to the floor. “Where’s the helmet?” he asks, pushing a finger deep into Chad’s chest.

“H-helmet?”

“The one you stole from Tyler!”

I look down to the floor and see my baby brother whimpering against the wall. “Ty?” I go to him. “Are you okay?”

He shakes his head no and says, “Yes.”

“What happened?”

He points a shaky finger at Chad. “He grabbed my helmet off my head while Daddy was in the bathroom!”

I look at him, my heart breaks, and then I look at my dad. “But that’s impossible. Chad was with me the whole time.”

“T-the g-guy in the gym,” Chad stammers and points to the gym. “H-he had a helmet on.”

My dad pushes his finger deeper into Chad’s chest. I can hear the knuckles crack. He looks at me and I nod. “That doesn’t mean you didn’t steal –“

“How did you get your hand blue again?” Tyler asks, rubbing a tear from his eye with the back of his sleeve. “When you took my helmet it wasn’t blue. I thought you washed the paint off.”

Chad’s mouth drops, my father’s eyes widen, and the skin on the back of my neck dances.

“Steven,” Chad hisses.

As if on cue Steven and Derek topple into the school fighting and cussing and beating on each other.

{R}adio

“Did you hear that?”

He grunts from the driver’s seat, his eyes slits to the early morning sun dripping over the horizon onto cracked blacktop. I rest my head against the passenger window as Dio whispers through the speakers, “*Don't write in starlight / 'Cause the words may come out real. You’re alone.*”

I blink and shift in my seat. My back still aches from Friday’s job and today came much faster than I’d wanted.; an entire weekend gone before I had a chance to do anything.

“I coulda driven to Louisiana and back,” I say to myself.

“Why would you wanna do that?” He reaches over my lap, fumbles through the glove box and pulls out a pair of battered sunglasses. A wrinkled picture of a teenage couple hugging in front of an old movie theater falls to the floor. I pick it up and push out the crease.

“’Cause Pantera was playin’ the Roadhouse, and it’s the closest they’re gonna get to home.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t get you and that glam shit,” he says with a laugh. The smile on his face looks exactly like the boy in the picture, same glasses and everything, just older. “This,” he taps the cassette player. “This right here, man. Dio is the future. In a few years no one’s gonna be talkin’ about that other stuff.”

I want to argue that Terry Glaze’s vocals are just as good as Dio’s but then Vivian Campbell’s solo kicks in and I find myself nodding my head in silence.

“*Don't dream of women / 'Cause they only bring you down. You’ll die alone.*”

“What’s up with your girl?” I blurt out, surprising myself.

“Wife,” he corrects me.

“Fine, what’s up with your wife?” The last word falls out of my mouth like a hot stone.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you sure as hell aren’t talkin’ my ear off this mornin’. And you’re listenin’ to the soft stuff.” I point to the radio as Dio belts out, “*Hey you, you know me, you've touched me, I'm real. I can comfort you.*” My head feels foggy for a second, but I shake it away.

“I’m just tired, that’s all. It was a long weekend.”

“Well, look at you, brother. Finally letting that hair down.” I playfully punch his arm and the car swerves over the yellow line. He turns and glares at me. For a second I see my reflection in his sunglasses. My face is distorted into a funhouse mirror’s smile.

“I picked up an extra shift, Jon. I needed the cash.” He notices the picture in my hand and snatches it away. He steers the car with his knee as he takes a long look and pushes the photo into the visor. “She’s pregnant.”

“Oh.”

Ronnie James Dio punctuates the silence with, “*And I, I'm darkness, I'm anger, I'm pain / I am master. You’re not alone with me.*”

“Oh? That’s it? You’re gonna be an uncle and all you got is ‘oh’? You should be excited.”

“I am,” I lie. “It’s just…”

A white deer walks into the road ahead of us and Cal slams on the brakes. I have to put my hands on the dashboard to keep from sliding into the windshield. The deer doesn’t flinch. It just stands, backlit by a new sun, and tilts its head like it’s studying us. There is no one else on the road and the smell of hot brakes and smoking rubber seeps through the car’s vents. The world seems to freeze like the last second of an ending dream as Vivian Campbell breaks into another solo. It’s cut short as Cal turns off the car and kicks open the door.

I rub my eyes with the back of my hands and then look out the glass. “Just flash your lights. It’ll go away,” I say. Cal turns halfway in his seat and gives me a weird studying look and then pulls himself out of the car. He walks the ten steps it takes to get to the deer and then stops. The white buck doesn’t move. It stands at nearly eye level with Cal and stares past him back towards me. Large antlers cast forked shadows the reach like crooked branches over the hood of the car.

Cal turns and waves me to come over. The radio clicks on.

"*Protect your soul*," Dio sings. "*Kill them all.*"

It clicks back off.

I blink away the fog again and swing my door open. Rusty hinges squeak and an old suspension sighs in relief as I stand up.

"Help me with this," he says looking back at the animal.

"Help you?" I'm five feet away now. "Just clap your hands, it'll run off."

He gives me that queer look again. I take a few more steps and then stop a yard behind him. The buck glimmers in the sunlight. White hair twitches and expands over muscles that roll in corded waves over the shoulders. The deer shuffles its front feet on the blacktop one after the other, then drags its right foot back. Click click scraaatch. The sound echoes across the empty road. It repeats the movement. "Is… is it dancing?" I ask.

"What is wrong with you?" Cal asks. He crouches down and stares at the deer's hooves as it continues its dance. "Who would do this? *What* would do this?" He rubs a calloused hand across a stubbled chin.

I hear the radio click on behind us.

"There's something wrong with your car –," I start to say but the fog seeps in like brake smoke through air vents.

Cal looks up at me, stands, and has his arm around my shoulder turning me away. "My fault," he says. "You shouldn't have to see things like this."

The fog is making me dizzy. Nausea washes over me and I vomit onto the road leaving a wet splatter over two nearly identical shadows. I hear the car's radio click off. Now I'm embarrassed and pushing him away. "Must still be hungover," I lie and wipe my mouth with the bottom of my shirt. I force a smile, but it feels twisted and wrong. "See things like what?" I ask. "Albino deer ain't anything new."

"Albino deer? What the hell are you talking about – ?"

"That," I say and turn back towards the white buck. It's gone. In its place are the maggot-infested remains of a charred turkey vulture. Its wings spread outward like an ashen angel as its red head stares into the cloudless sky. A long serrated line bisects the center. Guts and organs spill out onto the street. One long cable of intestines wraps around the sole of my shoe. I feel the bile rolling over itself in my throat.

"What… what is -?" I stammer and back away. The radio behind me clicks on and I swear the bird's blue and brown eyes blink at me as Dio screams for me to run.

{S}tranger

I'm awake,

Flannel sheets. Not my sheets. Smell like dirt. And iron. In bed. But not my bed. Small. I can feel the edges. Not a king. Maybe a twin,

"Hungry, sweetheart?" The lady at the register smiles. A triple-decker display rotates slowly on the counter.

I nod, but say, "No. No, thank you." This place smells like strawberries and thick cut steak fries. My mouth waters. A booth in the corner is occupied by a an old shaky man moving food around his plate. He keeps staring at the empty seat across from him and sighing. He looks so sad. I recognize that look. My heart tugs my eyes back to the display.

"Are you sure," she asks. She sees me eyeing the glass. "Best in the county. Been a family recipe for years," she says. "Just one won't kill you." Her smile falters. A memory creeps into upturned eyes. She shakes it away. Just a passing…

Fog. Awake again.

Same bed. On my side. The pillow is new. It crinkles when I move. It's damp where my eyes rest. My feet shift. Cold sheets brush bare skin.

"It's not often we have someone come in here to not eat," she says. "You lost?"

I nod my head yes and say, "No. No, ma'am. I'm, um, I'm…" I stare at the menu behind her. "Why is that painted over?" I point to paint that doesn't quite match the rest of the board. Three letters and an exclamation point. The first letter is definitely a "P".

"Oh," she says without looking. "We don't sell that item anymore." Her smile fades.

"But," I look back to the carousel.

"I mean, we don't *advertise* it anymore. Those who want it bad enough can have it, you know what I'm sayin'?"

I nod my head despite my confusion. "I need help."

"Lawd Jesus, we all do," she laughs. It's genuine. It's contagious.

He's contagious.

I'm awake. Sitting. Feet dangling off the side of this bed. The rocking chair moves beside me. Outside the storm is raging. Inside my clothes are wet. I push hair out of my face. My hand smells like fireworks.

"Normally I charge people for help," she laughs. "But that look on your face tells me you're in a real pickle. What can I do for ya?"

"This," I pull three sheets of paper out of my bag and place them on the counter. "I just wanted to know if I could hang these in your window. It's … it's…,"

She picks up the paper, turns it in her hands and frowns. "Oh no, sweetie. You know this girl?"

My face mimics hers. "She's my sister."

I'm standing.

Awake and standing. My back to the room. In a hallway. The chair creaks behind me. In front is a silent room. A silent room with windows, a big bed, and a tree that scratches.

"How long has it been?" she asks still looking at the paper.

"A few days or a few weeks or months. We don't really know." I reach for the other two. "*I*, um, don't know much. I haven't seen her in awhile. I'm just doing this for my parents."

She puts a warm hand on top of mine. "You're doing this for more than just your parents," she says. "I can see it in your eyes." She looks over my shoulder to the man in the booth then back to me. "I'll put two up on the main windows. You can put one on the door on your way out."

"Thank you," I say.

I'm shivering.

It's cold. No. I'm cold. This room is hot. It's radiating. I'm standing in front of the glass. Blue and red flashes through the window. Blue and red lights blinking outside. Blue and red eyes.

I tape the paper to the inside of the glass door. My finger lingers on her cheekbone. The red ink smudges through her hair. I push my way to the outside, but before the door closes I hear, "Good luck. I'll pray for you and her. Ain't nothing worse than breaking the bond between siblings."

I give a small wave and let the door close. I turn to go to my car when I hear the sound of paper ripping.

"She's right you know," a voice hisses behind me. "About the siblings thing. Breaking that bond is…," his voice lowers into a whisper. "Oh so delicious."

I turn. A shower of confetti rains down on a man shadowed by the diner's awning. Tiny white pieces float around his head like moths around a flame. His eyes glow from beneath an arched brow.

"Why would you do that - ?" I start to say, but a fog slips into my head.

I'm turning.

Away from the window. Back into the room. A wide bed with old indentations. A door left ajar. The smell of grief and fear. One set of muddied footprints leads straight to me.

"Hello? Dan? Hello?" The phone screams in my ear. I blink. The street in front of me looks blurred, like watching life through a dirty television. "Dan? Are you there?" I blink again and realize I'm sitting in my car.

"Hello?" a voice says from my mouth. "M… Marcia?"

"Jesus, Dan. Are you okay?"

"Am I?"

"I don't know. You called me." Her voice is cracking. She's been crying. "You called me and you didn't say anything coherent. You just breathed in the phone and mumbled something."

The world is darker. Street lights are flicking on. I wonder how long I've been sitting here. Someone else's thought crosses my mind. "I have to go."

"Where? Dan? Where do you have to go?"

"A house." My fingers find the key and turn on the car. "I think I know who has her."

"Dan? Who has her? You mean your sister? You can't go there alone. Tell me where it is and I'll send the closest officers. Dan?"

I hear Noah crying in the background. Little Noah. My son. The brother without a sibling anymore. Just like me. "What did I say?"

"What? Dan? You're not making sense. Tell me where you're going and I'll send a patrol."

I turn on my headlights. A flicker of a shadow walks away from the car. "Marcia, what did I say?"

"When?"

"When I was mumbling."

A long pause. I put the car into drive and pull out of the parking lot. Cruise control isn't on, but it's clearly on autopilot. I glance in the rearview and see the old man picking up pieces of scrap paper and clutching them to his heart. I feel nothing. I'm numb. She lets out a long sigh. "You…," she fumbles over the word. "You kept saying 'He's smiling at me'."

The phone falls out of my hand and lodges itself between the seat and the console.

I'm in the hallway.

Faded squares dot the walls where pictures used to hang. I touch one of them and leave fingerpaintings of red. My head turns as if studying

the wall, and my feet walk away from me.

"You can't park here," he says. He's old. Not as old as the man in the diner, but old enough. Fat cheeks splotched with broken blood vessels wobble when he talks. A stringy, grey goatee frames thin frowning lips. "Pull your car down the street. Park in front of that house down there. You can't be parkin' in the driveway, man."

I nod and put the car into reverse. He seems to recoil from the headlights as I pull away. I park, lock the car, and jog back. He's entering the house. "He's upstairs," he says over his shoulder and then disappears off to the right.

"Who is?" I call after him. No response. I walk through the door and up the carpeted stairs. Thunder cracks outside and the smell of the coming storm fills the house.

I'm at the top of the stairs.

Looking down. Naked brown footprints muddy the stairs leading away from a heap on the floor. I follow the path. Thirteen steps. Thirteen feet. Thirteen shades of red drying to brown. Wind and rain and black limbs creep through a broken window.

"Hello?" I say. Two rooms to my left and a voice comes out of one. Or out of my head. Or both. It's hard to tell.

"One second," it says. "Just finishing up."

I follow the sound around the corner. I stand between the two rooms staring at the wall. I hear whispering to my left, and a baby whimpering to my right.

"Come in," he says, and I turn towards his voice. A young man brushes by me, his head down, a vacant smile twisting his face. "Don't mind him," the man in the room says. "Boys have always been a handful at that age." He laughs. It's contagious. "Have a seat."

He's sitting on the bed and standing at the window. I sit beside him as he looks down at me from across the room.

Confusion becomes a lighthouse in the fog. I shake my head. "Why am I here?"

He's no longer beside me or at the window. He's crouching in a corner. His back is to me. His shoulders are heaving. He's giggling.

Standing above the heap.

It doesn't move. Neither do I. A mirrored pool of red creates islands of us both. A thick Persian rug squishes beneath my feet. The Glock 19 on the heap's back blinks in and out in the red and blue strobe.

The giggle turns into a cackle, the cackle into a roar. I clamp my hands on my ears and squeeze my eyes shut. I count to thirteen and open them.

He's standing in front of me. His head is tilted sickenly to the side like he's trying to peer through the tops of my eyes. His body is still facing the corner.

Vibrations tease the corners of his mouth. They pull horizontally like they've been hooked with fishing line on each side and stretched. His red lips turn purple, then black, then white, and then crack. Red seams slice through in vertical caverns. The corners shoot up and gather globs of skin in lumpy handfuls of flesh until cauliflowered cheeks swim in stretched bulges of pale pink.

He pushes his head forward until our noses are touching. Arms roll on dislocated shoulders as slimy hands pull mine from my ears. "I need," he whispers with breath that reeks of sulfur. "I need to borrow your body for a few hours." His eyes widen; tiny black dots swimming in oceans of blue and brown. His smile grows and I feel the fog pushing its way back in.

I'm awake,

Flannel sheets. Not my sheets. Smell like dirt. And iron. In bed. But not my bed. Small. I can feel the edges. Not a king. Maybe a twin.

{T}win

“You’re a miserable old bastard.”

He takes a drag of his Marlboro Red and smiles. “I wouldn’t think so myself, but everyone has a habit of reminding me.” He laughs.

“And you know why that is, right?” I ask. He shakes his head no. “’Cause no one trusts a priest these days.”

“And that’s coming from a dentist?” Another laugh. “I always say, fixin’ teeth ain’t nothing compared to mending souls.” Another long pull from his cigarette. I sip my coffee and look out over the long driveway that drapes a sunken hill and disappears into the morning’s creeping fog.

“If only mama could see us now.”

He nods. “Two old codgers using up their last few years complaining about their flock.”

“Now, I’m not that old, Eugene,” I protest.

“You’re as old as me!”

“No, you’re six minutes older.” He has something witty to respond with, I can see his lips twitch, but he’s staring out into the distance and the moment passes. “Somethin’ on your mind?”

“This town,” he sighs. “This life. Hell, everything is on my mind.” He lights another cigarette. A trail of smoke swirls his head like a halo. “I buried the Vandersons last Saturday. Both of ‘em. You ever wonder if what you devoted your life to just isn’t real anymore?”

“No,” I say. “It’s not like if I stopped believing in teeth they’d all disappear.” I try to smile, but he’s sulking into the fog.

“You know what I mean, Seymour,” he grumbles.

“Listen, this is your third crisis of faith this year. Maybe you just need a vacation. Loosen that clerical collar for a few days. Get out into the sunshine and relax.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He snuffs out the Marlboro and stands. “But even a broken clock is right twice a day, I like to say.”

“So that’s what I am? A broken clock?”

“If the shoe fits.”

“Now you’re just mixing metaphors.” We both laugh as he walks to his car.

“You want to get lunch?” he asks as he climbs into the old sedan. “I’ve got a double baptism this morning –“

“Been a lot of those lately.”

“Been a lot of them for years. Somethin’ in the water.”

“Or Reba’s cookin’,” I add.

“Another thing about this town. Why have one when it’s so easy to have two, I say.” He pulls his seatbelt across his chest. “So, lunch?”

“Can’t. I’m booked solid. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Okay. Why don’t you lay under my car so the tires will split you in half as I drive away?”

I blink. “W-what?”

“I said give me a call when you’re free tomorrow.” Eugene pulls the door shut and rolls down the window. “I want to piss in your skull as crows eat your rotting intestines. Okay?”

I trip over my feet as I step backwards. I can feel my face go cold. “Why-why would you say that?”

“Wow,” he says with a laugh. “If I knew you still hated the diner that much I wouldn’t have said anything.” He shifts his car into drive and pulls out into the driveway. “Call me tomorrow,” he says waving out the window. I stare as the car disappears over the hill kicking up dust in

the shape of swarming moths.

I turn and walk back to the porch shaking the cobwebs from my head. Either he's messing with me, which is not something he's ever done, or I'm hearing things. I drink the rest of my coffee and feel my heart slowing in my chest. I laugh. "He wouldn't say that," I say to the empty lawn in front of me. "And I'm not hearing things."

Yes you are.

The mug drops from my hand and shatters on the wood floor. My eyes swim in my head as I scan the porch and lawn for the voice. There's nothing. A stray cat meows next to a leafless tree and a few birds chirp somewhere off in the distance, but nothing else makes a sound. I just need some sleep, I think. Some sleep, and something stiffer than that. I look at the coffee puddle on the floor for a moment and then walk into the house to get a broom. As I pass the brass-framed mirror in the foyer I stop and check out my reflection.

I *do* look old. Older than Eugene by years. I use my fingers to push out the crow's feet and massage the purple bags under tired eyes. My reflection looks over my shoulder at something behind me. I push the skin around my chin back to where it used to be when I was young and twenty and my reflection blinks. I lick my palm and press down on wild grey hairs that refuse to lie down and my reflection laughs.

There's a tingling in my arm that starts in my palm and worms its way up through the veins to my shoulder. It feels like tiny ants are marching two by two in my veins. I shake it loose, flexing and relaxing my fingers until the ants take a rest. The clock above the door chimes seven times and without thinking I grab my keys. I pull the door shut, step over the broken mug, and walk to my car. The stray cat waves to me from its position on the tree. Tiny pins stretch its skin out from the center exposing bright red curtains of muscle and organs. The chirping birds from before have turned to crows and are pecking at the cat's eyes as it squirms and lashes its tail. I smile and put the car into gear.

On the road the other drivers grin and curse out their windows. Some spit or make lewd gestures with their fingers and tongues. My horn blares a ghostly trumpet as the radio chants long diatribes in dead languages. The eyes in the rearview mirror never leave my face. They crinkle in the corner giving off the impression of a smile. Someone in the backseat hums softly and I can feel my mouth water.

As I pull into my office's parking lot the asphalt falls away to an endless pit of fire. White ash floats above the edge of the circle on sulfuric currents of boiling heat. I trot amiably around the edge, avoiding the flames and demons fused together in dual human hybrids, and up the stairs to the front door. My reflection in the glass cocks its head to one side like it's studying me, and then dips into a low bow. I return the gesture and then swing the door open and step inside.

The office is cool compared to the furnace outside, but the walls melt and drip onto the floor exposing a brown ribbed frame that expands and collapses with each heartbeat. Large rats with heads on each end and long tongues that look like red forked tails climb through the internals chewing and scratching at the insulation making it bleed pink puss out onto the writhing carpet. A framed painting of a large tooth swings on a rusted nail in a hypnotic dance as the glass reflects my other twin who dances and giggles silently. I watch for what seems like an eternity; my ankles and knees petrified and cracking under stagnant weight.

"Good morning, doctor," the receptionist says from behind a wall made of bones and tanned skin. "I hope you bleed out of every open hole until you drown in your own fluids." Here face is liquefied as her nose and eyes ooze and collapse over one another. Her mouth opens to her chin and swallows large chunks of floating skin leaving wet sores that spout streams of liquid in beautiful arcs.

I blink at her as my reflection disembowels itself in the corner of my eye. "Is my first appointment here?" I ask. She shakes her head no and a cavalry of maggots march out of her bleeding ears. "Then who is this?" I point to the man dressed in his Sunday best. A beacon of blue in the crusted scab colored office.

"Who is who?" Her mouth doesn't move. Her lips are bound together with rusted wire sewn in a jagged cross-stitch.

"Never mind," I say to her, and, "Follow me," to the man with a smile that curves around the sides of his face.

"But, doctor, there's no one there." Her voice enters my head like a moist bullet, massaging my brain and rocking the tumultuous room into a calm chaos.

I turn to her. The bone and flesh wall transforms into a wood and metal desk. Her face shimmers and settles into lovely normality. She smiles a worried smile as the man behind me puts a hand on my shoulder. I watch as her lips rupture and a waterfall of blood drapes her chin. Her canines and lateral incisors grow and expand until they push through the lower palette and out through the bottom of her chin.

A gentle fog pushes her bullet back out of my brain.

"I'll be in room 2," I say to her and walk towards the back. "Would you like any nitrous," I offer to the man following me. He just smiles that morbidly beautiful smile.

{T}ext

I pull off my sweatshirt and throw it in the hamper. With one hand I unclasp my bra and pull it out through my sleeve. Next to go are my socks and jeans both of which miss the hamper and lay in a toppling pile of dirty clothes. I stretch and yawn and stare at the little bookshelf beneath my bedroom window. A red spine with gold lettering is wedged between worn paperbacks and teen romance.

In the bible my mom gave us before she split is a passage about something I couldn't give two shits about. I can't remember what it said, or where it was, but I do recall it having a big red circle around a few lines of words. Now that circle has been carved out along with about a hundred other pages of quotes from old dead people and replaced with this nice ziploc bag of Bubblegum and a small one-hitter Bo gave me on our first date.

whats up

Speak of the devil. "Nothing," I write. "About to smoke and crash. Nuthin else goin on." If I'm going to be grounded I might as well enjoy it. I shift my bare feet and the old floor creaks beneath me.

fun you hear about steven

"Of course. Cops came to talk to Far." Stupid Farah, always picking the wrong boys. I could've told her Steven was a mental case. I mean, the homecoming prank was funny, but what he did to that Derek kid's family…

what did you hear

"What do u mean? The cat thing or the dog thing?" I would've loved to see the looks on their faces. All those strays on string.

hes missing

"He's prob just hiding from his mom. I bet he gets grounded for life." If his mom even notices. She spends so much time taking care of his brother. It's no wonder he switched schools.

maybe but the cops want to talk to him about Derek

"Of course they do. Derek probably whined about getting punched or something." First he complained to the coach about something Steven did to the mascot and stole the starting QB position, then he got into a fight after catching Steven during the Homecoming prank, and now Derek probably saw Steven messing with his dog. Maybe if Derek wasn't such a tattletale -

dereks dead

I have to read the text three times before it finally sinks in. "What?!!!! No way!!!"

cassie had his body come in yesterday

"OMG!! WTF?!! Is she sure?!!!" It had to be an accident or something. A car crash or -

totally sure the parents said it was him apparently his face was missing blown off

I feel my stomach turn. I look at the bible and close the cover. "Was it…." I don't know how to finish the text. I just can't see Steven doing something that awful. I mean, he has his issues, but…

what did the cops ask far

"I don't know. They asked about Steven, but she said she hadn't seen him since the party." I wish she was here now instead of crying in her room.

i dont think it was steven

I feel a blanket of relief cover me. "Good," I write. "Why do you think that?" There's a delay before I hit send. I stare out my bedroom window into the dark shadows of the backyard. Our old rusted swingset stands silent in the moonlight, its empty swings pendulum gently in the breeze.

Because.

That's not an answer. Curiosity gets the better of me. "Because why?" I write. A cloud shambles in front of the moon sending the outside world into a deeper black.

Because, it was Me.

The phone slips from my hand, bangs on the hardwood floor, and topples end over end under the bed. I stare out the window in shock. “He’s joking,” I say to my reflection in the glass. “It’s a joke, a very bad joke, but a joke.” I take a few deep breaths and bend over to pick up the phone. Something eats at the side of my brain. Something flirting on the edge of awareness. Something I saw. Something I saw out the window… I grab the phone and it hits me. Cold wet terror courses through my veins.

The swing.

Someone was in the swing.

I drop to my knees and crawl to the window. Sitting back on my heels I slowly raise up until my eyes barely peek over the bottom of the glass. A stubborn cloud dawdles in front of the moon blocking out most of the light but I can faintly see the blue seat swaying gently in the wind. Unoccupied. I breathe a sigh of relief and then jump completely out of my skin as the phone vibrates in my hand. I look down.

Hi.

“Hi?!!” I write. “Seriously?! You make a stupid joke and then say hi?!! WTF. BO?!” I’m fuming. I may cut him off for a week or two. But then change my mind because that’ll just punish me as well.

What joke?

“What joke? The one where you said you killed Derrek. Not. Funny.” I eye the bible.

Oh, that.

It wasn’t a joke.

I really did kill Derrek.

I feel ants marching across the back of my neck, gooseflesh breaks out on naked legs. I stand and dial Bo’s number. “This is not fucking funny,” I growl. Somehow even with the window closed I hear the faint thrumming of his ringtone; some Deep Purple song he’s obsessed with. I press my face into the glass, looking through the reflection and see a black figure sitting on the swing. A soft blue light flashes in its lap. I put the phone to my ear and the figure does the same. “H-hello?”

No answer.

“B-Bo?”

Still no answer.

“Say something. I can hear you breathing.”

The figure removes the blue light from its ear and presses a button. The line goes dead. I stare at the window for a moment longer as the figure kicks its feet back and starts swinging in high arcs.

“Nope,” I say out loud. “Fuck that. This is the point where I call the cops.” I turn the phone’s screen back on and start dialing. Before I can enter the last 1 a notification pops up on the screen.

Are you lonely?

“Seriously?! I was about to call the cops, Bo!” I type. Terror has switched gears and has morphed into anger. I hit send.

You don’t have to be alone.

God, boys are so dumb. “Are you trying to scare me so you can get in my pants?! Not. Going. to Work.” I look out the window and flip the bird to the figure standing in front of the swings. Wait… in front of the swings - ?

You’re never alone with me.

I look back out the window, the figure is gone. I scan the edge of the yard, the bushes behind the neighbor’s house, and between the trees behind them. Nothing. I get up on my tiptoes and try to look straight down.

Shit.

Below me standing with its face pressed into the wall is the top of a dark shadowed head. “Bo?” I type. I watch for what seems like an eternity. A dim blue light ignites below the figure’s head. It turns its head up towards me and I quickly drop below the windowsill. My phone vibrates.

I’m here.

I can feel my eyes watering. I want to shout out to Farah but I can’t. My throat squeezes down any sounds I try to force out. “Bo!” I write. “Please stop! You’re scaring me!” I hear heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. My phone comes to life in my hands.

I’m right here.

I’m shaking and gagging on sobs that stick in my throat. My eyes burn with tears that are too afraid to fall.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I look at the screen and read the words. I wait for the inevitable. When it doesn’t come I wait longer, determined not to be caught off-guard. When it still doesn’t happen I let out a huge sigh of relief and then gasp as a heavy hand pounds three times on the door. “Go away!” I scream. The words pull me to my feet. “Go the fuck away, Bo!”

The knob twists. Old hinges squeak. There’s a click click scraaatch at the window behind me. The sound startles me and I start to turn but the creaking floorboards bring me back to the door. My phone vibrates.

You never have to be alone again.

The door swings all the way open. I hear Farrah calling my name from miles away. A dark figure stands in the doorway silhouetted by the hall’s light. He’s a familiar shape but twisted. As if he’s been wrung out and left to warp in the sun. He takes an awkward step forward, his left foot bending sharply on a wobbling ankle. His arms don’t move, they just dangle bonelessly at his shoulders. His head tilts and lolls on a neck too flimsy to support the weight. A purple tongue flops over a bruised chin, and two brown eyes stare at me in agony.

“Bo?” I whisper.

I hear Farrah’s door open and shut from down the hall as my phone vibrates in my hand.

Smile.

Click click scraaatch goes my window again. I turn on my heel and come face to face with a blond man in a blue shirt. Bo’s phone lights his face leaving the rest of him and the world he torments in absolute black. A blue eye and a brown one burn holes into my soul as a wicked crease forms in the corners of his mouth and stretches out in bizarrely plastic distortion. The bottom half of his face seems to be melting upwards showing rows and rows of sharpened teeth the cage a forked tongue that darts in and out and wets cracked lips. I hear Farrah’s voice but before I can scream the man, the *thing*, winks at me and puts a finger to my lips.

“Shhhh…,” he says. “You mustn’t wake the baby.”

A tangle of black limbs unfolds itself from the beneath the darkness below the man and he removes his finger from my mouth to let the monster suckle.

{U}nderground

I never liked this job. This isn't something a little girl dreams of becoming. Well, maybe some girls, but not me. I always liked horses. When I was twelve I gathered the nerve to ask daddy for a pony and he laughed. A big belly laugh that reeked of whiskey and lavender. "Where are you going to keep a pony, Anita?" he asked. "Next to the coffins?"

Coffins and horses.

They all end up underground.

"Of course not!" I shouted back. "I'll take him someplace with wide open spaces like Kentucky or Spain!"

That elicited another roar of laughter. "Spain?!" he nearly choked on the word. "How are you going to get there? Is the pony going to fly first class?!" I remember storming out of the room after it became quite apparent his laughter wasn't going to stop.

Ten years later I married the first boy that looked like daddy, but acted completely different. We weren't happy, yet we weren't *unhappy*. We were amicable roommates who occasionally saw each other naked. He would spend his afternoons working on screenplays or reading up on old Cadillacs and I'd busy myself with flushing out body fluids and doing makeup on corpses. Rarely would we talk shop, rarely would we talk at all.

I guess it wasn't a surprise when he committed suicide.

The strange thing about dead bodies, I mean, if one takes a few minutes to contemplate what exactly qualifies as strange given the sub context, is that even after the proverbial life has left the more proverbial vessel, the husk just keeps twitching. I first came across this, and subsequently had my first waking terror, when I was six and wanted a sandwich. We weren't allowed to use knives, and by "we" I mean mother and I, so I needed daddy's permission to spread jelly on a toasted slice of wheat bread. He was in the "office", which is what we've called the prep room since before I could remember, and I was firmly planted between two unbreakable rules. Use a knife on my own, which would result in spankings, bed without dinner, and probably an unpleasant sharing of blame and beatings for my mother, or enter the office during working hours and, well, no penalty had yet been bestowed on this breakage, but the gruffness in which the law was passed down had led me to believe it was far worse than the knife violation. Being as they were, and given the age of the decider, I chose the more ambiguous rule and hoped for a lack of spankings. I was rather hungry, and the bread was already toasted.

I descended into the spotless main room. A large brick furnace stood to my right and an oversized refrigerator to my left. The rest of the room was empty. Unfortunately *completely* empty. A few times previously I had snuck down into the office to peek from the stairs when daddy was at a funeral or burying another customer. Curiosity is an evil drug that is considerably addictive to those below the age where reason begins replacing imagination. Each of the times I'd let myself venture into the basement the grand swath of white tile between the furnace and fridge would be inundated with gurneys and machines with hoses like octopus appendages. Those machines, the ones I'd come to find out later where the first of their kind to suck and drain the fluids out of bodies not quite ready to give up their hold, they were the ones that scared me the most, and on this day, the day I decided to take the unspoken punishment rather than let my sandwich be unjellied, all those machines were missing.

The furnace was prepping. Bluish brown flames flicked out of an arced mouth. A large exhaust fan pulled the hot, dry air out in great gusts and bellows. The house seemed to rock above me to the furnace's respiration. I turned my back to it, which being a six year old girl is no small feat. If one has never turned their back on a major fear just so they can face an even greater one, then one has never felt midday hunger for a crustless pb&j like I did that day. With a tiny shaking hand I knocked on the refrigerator door. It was a feeble knock, one that couldn't be heard in an empty cathedral, but somehow it met its target. The handle clicked. Clicked again, and then the door scratched its way open. My father stood in the doorway half astonished and half furious at his little daughter who dared interrupt his work.

"Where's your mother?" he sneered.

"At church," I said. We both knew that was a lie. Mother only went to church on the weekends, any other time she used that as an excuse meant she was… well, it meant she was most definitely *not* at church.

My father glowered. If I could have looked past the fluid stained butcher's apron I would have seen the flurry of emotions that twisted across his face. "What do you want?" he spit out at me.

My eyes picked up his words from the floor. "I need a knife," I whispered.

"What?!" There was a rustling of fabrics behind him. I looked up and his head was turned back towards the inside of the refrigerator.

"A knife," I repeated. His head swiveled back. For a moment it looked like his eyes were all black. "I … I need it for my sandwich."

He blinked. A smile slipped into the corners of his mouth but never reached his eyes. “Then get a knife.”

“But… you said I wasn’t allowed –“

There was rustling behind him again. A soft moan. I tried to step to the side to see, but daddy blocked my view. I only caught a glimpse of blonde hair above a blue shirt on a gurney.

I started to ask what’s going on, but daddy got to one knee and grabbed both my shoulders. He stared into my eyes. “Anita,” he said. “You’re a big girl now.”

“I’m six.”

“And you’ll be seven in a few months. That’s plenty old enough to use a butterknife by yourself. Someday you’ll have to use far sharper instruments.” He waved his hand behind him. I tried to follow it with my eyes, but he shifted again to block my view. “Go on upstairs and make your sandwich.” He winked. I’d never seen my father wink before. It seemed like it took all his concentrated effort to pull off the movement.

“Okay,” I whispered and turned towards the stairs.

“And Anita,” my daddy added. “Tell your mother I wish to talk to her *immediately* when she gets home.” He clicked the handle up, it clicked a second time, and then the door scratched closed. I stood on the bottom step for a good two seconds before the burping furnace chased me back upstairs.

I still think about that day, the way the body moved behind daddy. It was the first callous that formed over any emotional connection I have with the deceased. A body is just a body. A horse is just a horse. It doesn’t matter if it’s a complete stranger or your own husband. You do the job, prep the body, aide those who can still mourn, and then make yourself a sandwich with whatever knife you choose.

When he died, my husband, not daddy, I had far too many people asking who would prepare his body. It was never an option. I would do it the same way I’d done so many others before him. It didn’t matter if we were married, if he brought a fraction of humanity back into my life, or if he had a charred fetus lodged inside his abdomen. He was a husk. His life was a memory I would lock inside my heart and his body was a shell I would lock inside the ground. I loved the man, but once he died I didn’t love the body. I drained the fluid, sewed everything back into the body, and painted his face. I’d like to think I imagined his death, I imagined the crumbled set of arms and legs that twitched in his gut, and that it was all bits of a distorted reality breaking through my callous, but part of me knows the truth and has known it since I was six.

Coffins and horses and husbands with curses.

I put them all underground.

{V}ictim

“A dragon with two heads will only survive if one bites the throat of the other.” I wipe a crusted knife against my pant leg. “Does that make sense?”

His eyes go wide. Sweat drips around the creases in his nose and soaks into the rag. He mumbles something.

“Of course not,” I say. “It’s a ridiculous saying. And the logic itself doesn’t make a lick of sense. First off, dragons aren’t real, and secondly wouldn’t the dragon eventually bleed out?” I let out a big belly laugh that echoes off the walls of the small room.

He tilts his head in a shaky nod, the storm continues to blatter against the windows.

“I’m going to tell you a story.” I appraise the knife in weak lamplight and return it to the center of the circle. “Two people, we’ll call them brothers for lack of a better term, and being that their bond with each other came only from their differences with every other person in this world, brothers is what they will be. Two people, two *brothers*, against a world of … ,” I step towards him and he flinches. I smile. “See, brothers of blood can be broken. The world runs on blood. Blood can be replaced; corrupted. But brothers of destiny…”

He shakes his head.

“Too cliché?" I ask. "I know.” Beside me a small grey urn with red inscriptions sits atop a wooden pedestal and a sprig of lavender. I pick up the urn and place a bit of the flower in my mouth. After carefully chewing for a moment I remove half the wad and place it in the ash. “The story!” I shout. He jumps in the chair. I begin sprinkling the ash and mashed flower in a wide circle around his chair. “You must stop me if I get on a tangent again.” I wink like I see them do in the movies, but it doesn’t feel right on my face. “Two travelers converge on a path. One has fallen from his perch atop the highest of mountains, and the other has clawed his way up from the deepest of caves. They stand, bereft of knowledge, naked to the blazing sun, and thoroughly lost in both the physical and spiritual sense.” The urn runs dry so I replace the top and place it back on the pedestal. A long piece of white chalk is retrieved from a leather case, and I begin inscribing the floor and walls.

“The traveler from the mountains says ‘Brother, are we alone on this earth?’, to which the other replies, ‘Nay, fellow. For such a sun would shine on more than just us.’ So they agree to walk, hand in hand, until they arrive back at that spot from which they started in the hopes of searching out others in this great land.” The man is openly weeping now. I use the back of my hand to dry the tears. He recoils from my touch.

“After years of walking the skin has fallen away from their feet, the sun has burned their arms and backs to winged leather, and the wind has pushed all pigment away until they are white monsters floating above the earth. The traveler from the caves says, ‘Brother, maybe I was wrong. It seems we are alone’, to which the other replies, ‘Nay, fellow. For up ahead I hear the laughter of children and the cries of the newborn.’ So they continued to walk towards the sounds.”

A red puddle is forming beneath the man’s chair. His face is slack against the rag. I continue to draw.

“The two travelers, brothers now more than ever, float over a hill and approach a camp of people. They are greeted by a set of boys whose features look like reflections in the stillest of waters. The traveler from the mountains says, ‘Children, will you not welcome us into your homes, for we have walked the entirety of the earth just to find you,’ to which the boys reply, ‘Nay, monsters. For you are not like us, you do not share our blood. Be gone and rot within the earth on top of which you now float.’ And the children walked hand in hand back to their camp laughing and singing their songs.”

I remove the rag from his mouth. His jaw sags open and clotted blood clings to a lolling tongue. Wild eyes dance beneath the covers of resting lids.

“Insulted and left to die in their frail withering husks, the two brothers turn away from the camp. The traveler from the caves says, ‘We should let them be, for they are only temporary just like us. Some day they will be replaced with kinder souls,’ to which the other replies, ‘Nay, daeva. They are not deserving of this place. We are heirs to this world and shall enjoy it for them. Each time our body rots we shall remember this day.’ And the two brothers turned back to take what was owed.”

With the damp rag I wipe his mouth and chin. The crimson pool spreads into the carved trenches that circle the chair and cap in five triangles. White chalk soaks up the liquid and creates a wall of solid symbols. I crouch over him, the stranger, the brother, and push his lids up with my thumbs.

“Do you understand now?” I whisper eagerly.

A brown iris and a blue one swim in milky panic and then, as the last bit of life flows away, they roll up into the back of his skull. I lean over and kiss his forehead.

“Come home, brother,” I say, using my thumbs now to spread his mouth into a smile. “A new vessel awaits.”

{W}edding

Face the mirror. Are you alone? *Yes.*

Close your eyes. Are you still alone? *No.*

Open your eyes. Is anyone there? *Just me.*

Close your eyes. Who is there now? *We.*

A white gown custom made to be worn by me for a man I have already forgotten. A two year engagement climaxing at an empty altar. I kneel before a different one. I serve a different one. I am the different one.

He, the one will become my everything, He comes in my dreams. When I'm awake and aware He slips messages in whispers. Through reflections I see my other. Through mirrors I find my home.

"World, meet Greta," were the words I heard before language touched my tongue. "Greta, meet the world," are the words spoken by my gift to her own child weeks later, a child that won't be born until He whispers to her at her Awakening.

An ornate church on a crested hill. Large steeples framing an early morning sun. I arrive early to prepare. A gaggle of childhood friends, pampered and liquored, toting bags and a plastic-sheeted dress sneak by the priest who feigns obliviousness to the breakfast champagne and nervous excitement. We commandeer a back room that smells of frankincense and mothballs and sprawl about the floor like made-up starlets in silk pajamas lamenting our supposed loss of future freedoms. Old wives recount war stories of their first times and newlyweds flash giant rocks that blind them to their giver's inadequacies. The poor ones without a mate or any future of marriage silently smile in corners as the rest of the conversation screams "We, we, *we*" without a "Me" in sight.

"We are excited for my husband's promotion," one yells over the glistening karat weighing down a fattened finger.

"But won't you be moving?" asks a poor girl; single, alone, and frightfully happy.

"Yes, but it is what *we* want."

"But what about your diner?"

"I'll sell it."

"To who?"

"The young girl who works the counter; she makes the most delicious pies."

"But it was *your* dream."

"Ah, but *we* decided to move so *we* can pursue *his* dream."

The conversation continues this way, married hens and single chickens clucking at each other as I, the in-betweener, the one in marriage limbo, stares at my twin in the mirror.

Close your eyes. Are you alone? *I wish.*

Born to a family but raised in another home, I was never alone. Seven siblings that looked nothing like me, or each other for that matter, and even less like the two adults who absently loved us long enough for them to procure another replacement. "*We* can't have children," they'd say. "So we take care of those thrown away by the ones who can."

Now I'm surrounded by seven girls who are closer to me than my brothers and sisters, both those blood and adopted, and yet I am only drawn towards the mirror. What is it about reflections on one's wedding day? Why must a bride, capable enough to see herself in three angled full-length mirrors, need to seek the validation of others on how she looks? Why not just ask the mirror what *it* thinks?

Close your eyes. You are alone.

A twirl. A cascade of cloth in a simple mirror. A glimpse. A peak. A smiling face when I was frowning. Out of the corner of my eye, looking away at something on the floor, an intense feeling, a prickling sensation at the nape of my neck, of being watched. Of being studied. Of being beckoned.

“We’ve decided to have a baby.”

The conversations slip over me. I’m pulling on layers of fabric. Someone zips me up. I do a turn in the mirror but my reflection stays put. Grinning.

“We love our new golf membership.”

I’m staring, shaking my head, blinking until my eyes water. My mirror twin laughs and bows. Black beads drip out of clouded eyes. Long nails tap the mirrored glass between us.

“We’ve decided to hire a nanny.”

A fog billows from beneath my dress, pressing out on corset strings until they bind against tight knots. My lungs swell for the first time. High heels click on the tile in the hallway, click on the wood in the rectory, and scratch on the gravel as I escape to the parking lot. Fleeing my friends. Fleeing the other. Fleeing myself.

I just need to breathe. I just need to calm down. I just need to see. Every car window around me shows my reflection as it points, and laughs, and covers a broken grin.

Open your eyes. Are you still alone?

I drop to my knees ruining a dress that was never for me, not the me I’ve become, not the me I was planned to be. I scream and duck beneath windows where a familiar face presses against the glass. She’s mute to my madness. She’s silent to my terror. The other girls are looking for me, calling out a name that was never mine. Begging me to come back. Begging me to become a “We”.

“It’s for your own good,” one yells while drinking enough alcohol to temporarily erase her husband’s infidelity.

“You’ll love being married,” another one says with the sticky sour rasp of a war prisoner.

“You’re never alone with me,” His voice whispers in my head.

I gather the cotton and lace and pull myself to feet that walk under new guidance. They arrow towards the back of the lot where a limo for the dead rumbles in idle. I stare into a tinted window, into eyes that I’ve stared at for years, but never really saw. They blink. I don’t. They crease at the corners as smile contorts her face. I tilt my head unwillingly as if I’m being forced to study myself. She nods. I feel myself being stretched into the other, like pulling taffy apart over a flame. White flutters as my vision goes.

Close your eyes. Is anyone there?

Hands grasp my shoulders, forearms hook my waist. I’m lifted, dragged backwards on broken heels, and pulled away from the wedding day hearse.

“Think about your husband,” one says into my ear, ignoring the fact that I haven’t said yes.

“Think of your children,” another one chirps, oblivious to the hundreds I would eventually steal.

“Think of yourself,” He whispers through the wind.

The black limo that is not a limo turns in a wide arc; the driver unseen but staring. Hinges creak as the rear door swings open. On rails where a coffin should be sits a single wild flower. A purple beacon in this world of black. A single moment of lucidity resting on reflected chaos.

Open your eyes. Who is there now?

I bat at the hands that helped me just moments before. I push at faces tangled up in empathy and confusion. I kick at the air until shoes slip from my feet. I scream.

“Let her go,” the married women say.

“Bring her back,” the single women yell.

“Come to me,” He whispers above the roar.

My twin, seated deep in darkened glass, opens her arms in an embrace, the reflection shimmering in the slow morning heat. I break from the grasps of the women, charge through the huddle and dive into the back of my chariot. The engine roars to life as tires spin and kick up gravel into my sisters’ faces. A burst of laughter swells in my belly and works its way out of a confused mouth. My head spins, rights itself, and

then spins again.

The driver, as the car propels down the sloping hill escaping the church's shadowed steeples, turns back towards me and smiles. "I've been waiting for you," he says through a mouth that doesn't open.

"Me?" I ask as my face shifts. Bones creak beneath the skin. My blonde hair twists into brown curls. At that moment, as my old life seeps out onto the floor around me, and I am reminded of who I am since being stolen away at birth, I yearn to become a "We".

He nods. "Are you ready?"

We look at him with new eyes. We smile. We say, "Yes."

{X}erosis

“He promised.”

She doesn't respond. Her eyes are shut. Wisps of fragile hair sweep down into her face. I use the back of a shaking hand to push them behind her ear. I lean down and kiss a dry cheek. “He promised,” I repeat softly. “He promised.”

The tears are coming now.

There’s a knock at the door. Two raps and a drag of knuckles. His knock. My hips hurt as I stand, knees creak and groan, untreated arthritis twisting my joints into gnarled limbs. I pull the blanket up to her chin and kiss her forehead. Another trio of knocks. I turn and walk across the short room. He knocks again just as I reach the door.

“Hold on,” I say and steady myself. “I can only move so fast.”

There’s a sigh on the other side. I can practically hear him smiling. The deadbolt swings beneath my thumb and the knob twists. I trip over my own feet as the old inn door swings inwards. He doesn’t enter, just stands there with his hands clasped behind his back, his head tilted in that irritatingly crooked studious pose. One swollen cloud slinks in front of the late day sun and casts everything into a grey haze.

“Well,” he says. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

I pull a sleeve across my face to blot the tears, and steal a glance towards the bed. “What if I don’t?” I ask.

“Ah,” he laughs. “Someone has found bravery in their old age.” He winks. Gooseflesh ripples across my back. “But, if we’re being completely honest, and that’s what friends do, right, Ian?” He leans on the word friends. “Then it doesn’t matter at all whether you invite me in or not, because…” I blink and he’s gone. The grey parking lot with its broken asphalt and dying weeds stares back at me. And then I feel his breath on my neck. “Because I’m already inside.”

I turn on a heel. Bright shards of pain crack in my hips. His face is inches from mine. The stench of iron and dirt overwhelm me. He’s smiling that awful smile. Cracks and caverns line the corners of his face in arced ridges that cap with engorged chunks of flesh. He sucks on his teeth, and then turns away from me.

“How is she feeling? She looks to be perking up a bit.” He nudges her shoulder with a long finger. It takes all my willpower not to reach out and pull his arm away.

“It didn’t work,” I say. “You promised. I did exactly as you said and it didn’t work, and you promised!”

He’s leaning over her now, looking into her closed eyes. “She’s rather dry, don’t you think?” He laughs and presses a finger into her forehead. I hear a faint cracking sound.

“Stop it!” I scream and he turns on me. The same finger he pressed into my wife’s head is pushing me back across the room.

“You did not finish the job.” The smile widens. “You don’t get your prize until you finish the job.” Spit like acid sprays my face.

“I.. I don’t understand,” I stammer. My heels hit the side wall and a flailing arm slaps on the tv. A reporter spinning a story about a mother and son poisoning cuts away to a commercial and then disappears completely as the power cord is ripped from the wall.

“What do you not understand?” he sneers. “You do not get your reward until the task is done.”

“But it is done! I did everything you asked! I ruined my own life, I lost my house, my son… he saw… he helped… and now,” I point towards the bed. “You promised!”

He laughs again. Tears well up in old eyes and I blink them away. “Age,” he says, turning back towards the door. “Is something you and I both have in common.” My knees wobble as the adrenaline works its way out of my blood. “I’d have you guess how old I am, but I’m afraid we don’t have time for that at the moment.” He puts his ear to the door. “Maybe later. Probably never.”

“What does this have to do with -?”

He raises a finger and the air seems to be sucked from the room. My eyes bulge and I can feel my heart’s irregular beat in my ears. “You don’t have much time left to be asking silly questions,” he says. “This body is tired. It’s seen better days.” He motions with his hand towards the bed. “It’s all dried up, if you know what I’m saying.” That laugh again. “So I really need you to finish the one job you were supposed to do.”

“But… but I did-?”

My words are cut short by a single knock at the door. “Ah,” he says as he stands and twists the knob. “Have you met my brother?”

The door swings open. I gasp and feel my head spin. A boy of about seventeen bearing a striking resemblance to a picture hanging on the wall of a house that burnt down glares at me from the doorway. On his shoulder is the charred remains of … “It can’t be!” I scream.

“Now, now, Ian, no reason to get yourself all worked up.” He motions for the boy to drop the body in the middle of the room. The boy does, nods to the man, and then leaves the room shutting the door behind him. Before he does he fixes another glare on me and blinks one eye in an awkward wink that doesn’t quite fit his face.

“Not your biggest fan,” he says to me. “Actually, not a big fan of any of you. Doesn’t have my sense of humor about the situation.” The smile returns as a laugh explodes from his mouth.

“Is that her?” I ask. The heap of black ash shifts on the floor. A choked moan crumbles from cracked lips.

“You don’t recognize your handiwork?” he asks. “Of course it’s her, and lucky for you we found her before she went ahead and died of her own accord.” He tsk-tsks me with a tongue that darts through caged teeth. “Her twins,” he spits out the word, “Are only half-accounted for, but I have a feeling they won’t be too much of a problem going forward, what with them being crusted like their mother and all.” I cringe as he laughs.

“I… I thought the fire would…”

“Yes, but it didn’t.” He stands and with one foot rolls the body towards me. “So, if you want your grand prize,” he motions towards the bed where my wife sleeps like the dead. “Then you’re going to have to get your hands dirty.” I look from the dry heap on the floor to the dry body in the bed. “Decisions, decisions,” he says.

I kneel. Her eyelids flutter. I place one hand over her mouth, the charred skin tickles my palm, and my other hand over what’s left of her nose. She doesn’t struggle. She rolls into me, one arm resting on my wrist. I whisper to her that I’m sorry, that I wish I could take it all back, and that I’d gladly take her place as one tear drops from my eye and lands on her cheek. I press my forehead to hers and weep. We stay like that for minutes until he clears his throat.

“Tick tock, tick tock,” he laughs. “You two can catch up later. Don’t you want to see your reward?”

I stand and stagger to the bed. Every bone and joint are afire with pain. I place an ashen palm against my wife’s head. She doesn’t move. “But you promised,” I whisper.

“That I did,” he says with a smile and then he’s gone. The door swings shut behind him. I can hear him laughing from miles away, an echo of joyful terror in my head.

I go to chase him but the sheets shift beside me. The dry skin of her head moves beneath my hand. A frail arm pulls itself from beneath the covers and rests against my face. I take a breath to steady my heart, and then look into her eyes. Her eyelids flutter like the one on the floor, and then peel themselves upward. Hollow sockets stare back at me. Her mouth creases pulling at the threads sewn in to keep it closed. They tear, pulling slits of flesh from her lips. Her mouth opens wide. A gaping maw of blackness. I lean in to kiss my bride.

And then she screams.

For hours she screams. Painful howls ripping from dried lungs. Her throat tears and dry dustings of flesh batter the side of my head as I rock her, trying to soothe my lost love. I pet her head until her hair pulls out in clumps. I rub her cheeks until bone breaks through the surface. I whisper into her ears but dust pours back out at me.

And still she screams.

There’s a pounding at the door.

I try to quiet it her by putting my hand over her mouth. The howl echoes through hollow cheeks.

There’s another knock at the door. A man yells for me to open up. I ignore him and plead to my wife to calm down.

There’s another pounding. More yelling and then the door kicks open. Two men rush in.

“Dad?!” one yells. “Dad, what the hell?”

I turn and see Max standing in the doorway, his mouth agape. The man beside him looks at the body on the floor, the body in the bed, and

then pulls his gun.

“Step away from the woman, sir,” he shouts.

“But, Georgie, that’s my dad,” Max says.

“Sir, step away from - What the fuck?! “

My wife screams again and sits upright. She pushes off of me and rolls to the floor. One arm snaps beneath her and grey bone pokes through thin skin. The man beside Max fires his gun.

“No!” I scream and rush towards him. I trip over the burnt remains of a quiet girl and fall into the man’s chest. He fires again, the gun exploding by my left ear. My eardrum pops and a high tinny noise fills my head. He fires again and again as I fall to the floor with my hands covering my head. I kneel and scream for my wife.

The floor vibrates beside me. I look over to see the tv on its side, red splattered glass splayed out on the floor. Next falls a gun, followed by the man who held it. I look up through watering eyes to see Max shaking and pointing behind me. I don’t need to look, I know she’s gone.

Max mouths something to me, something I can’t hear. I just shake my head and cry. “He promised to bring her back,” I wail. “Why did it have to be like this?!”

{Y}uck

Mommy's not the same anymore. At least she stopped crying.

I thought she was mad at me. When they found Wrinkles in my bed sleeping with his skin off, I thought Mommy was going to yell. But she didn't. She just cried. Daddy tried to hug her, but Mommy pushed him. I had to sleep in Derek's room.

I still do.

When the nice police officer came to my house Mommy cried again. Daddy didn't try to hug her that time. They said Derek was gone. Gone like Wrinkles. I asked the nice police officer if Derek was going to be in my bed with his skin off, and Mommy ran out of the room.The police officer wrote something down in his notepad. It was black and white. I told him mine had a unicorn on the cover. Daddy put a hand on my knee and told me to shush. I wanted to ask the nice police officer how names can be colors, but I didn't.

We went to the scary place with all the rocks and words to look at a hole. Everyone was talking about Derek like he is the nicest person ever. They even showed pictures of him wearing his football pads. I like him in his pads. His shoulders look big. Like he can carry a mountain. Like he's invincible. Tara held my hand and Chad held hers. I wish Derek was there to see it.

When we got home Mommy stopped wearing colors. She cried a lot, and Daddy was always mad. I played in Derek's room and talked to my sister in the window. The nice lady from next door brought us food once. Mommy must've made a scary face, because when she opened the door the lady from next door put the food on the porch and left real fast. I asked Mommy if I could go play with Centaur, but Mommy said no. I asked why, and she said something I didn't understand. Nose Bow Tuss. It must be a bad word because Mommy locked all the locks on the front door after that.

I ate a lot of mac'n'cheese. The food from Mrs Reynolds grew fuzzy trees on top.

Daddy and Mommy got into a fight one night. It was loud. I hid in my room with my dolls and played hide and seek with the mirror. Something broke and then the fighting stopped. Mommy came up the stairs and told me everything will be okay. I heard the door slam and Daddy's car drive away. Mommy stroked my hair until I fell asleep. She talked to herself in my mirror.

Now we're playing a game. Mommy told me to close my eyes and count to twenty. Then open my eyes. I told her that's not really a game. She smiled weird. She said the game is when I open my eyes I have to tell her what's different. I said okay.

I close my eyes. One. Two. Three. I open my right eye a little bit and Mommy is looking at me with her hands on her hips. She tells me not to cheat. I say okay and start over.

One. Two. Three. I hear something moving. I almost open my eyes, but don't want to make Mommy mad like Daddy did. My hair is still red from what she spilled on her hands. Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. I open my eyes.

I'm all alone.

I don't like being in the basement alone. The washer and dryer look like hungry mouths in the corner. I'm standing in the middle of the basement and the shadows scare me. I yell for Mommy and she tells me to count again. She says it'll be different now. Something will change.

I feel tingly. I'm excited. I'm not scared anymore. I close my eyes and itch my nose. One. Two. Three. I think I hear Wrinkles. Something is whining in the corner. Twelve. Thirteen. Something hits my arm. This is going to be easy, I think. Nineteen. Twenty. I open my eyes.

I'm not alone.

I yell Chad's name and point. I tell Mommy that Chad is the thing that's different in the room. I clap my hands. He makes that sound like Wrinkles. I ask Mommy what's wrong with him and she stands in the doorway upstairs with her hands on her hips. She says nothing is wrong with Chad, he's just playing the game. I ask why he won't talk, and Mommy says it's because she has his tongue. I laugh and close my eyes. I want to play again, I tell Mommy. This is fun.

One. Two. Three. My ears hurt from trying to listen. All I hear is Chad pretending to cry. I don't know why that's part of the game, but it makes me laugh. Seven. Eight. Nine. Still no noise. This is going to be hard, I think, and then something loud crashes down the stairs. I try to guess what it is in my head. A suitcase. A basket of laundry. Thirteen. Fourteen. It sounds wet. Maybe a box of water balloons. Nineteen. Twenty. I open my eyes.

I was right about the box. I'm sad because I was wrong about the water balloons. Chad is making an awful gagging sound. I tell him to stop, he's ruining the game. Black liquid is spilling out the corner of the box. There's a tear. It smells like Wrinkles did. Mommy will be mad. I call

to Mommy and her shadow stands in the doorway again. I tell her her box broke and she laughs. She says it's okay . She says it won't hurt the things any more than they already are. I look over the edge of the box. Black dolls that move and squirm like worms are squished inside. All I can say is "Yuck".

Mommy asks if I'm ready to play another game. I push the box away with my toe and ask her if it's going to be gross again. I don't like gross. Gross isn't fun. She says no, this time will be really fun. Her voice sounds different. It sounds older. I ask her what game and she says that I need to stand in the corner and close my eyes. I ask her if I'm in trouble and she says no. This time I have to tell her what's the same. I say I don't understand and she says, everything will be different when I turn around. I just need to tell her what's the same.

This game sounds hard, but I walk over to the corner and close my eyes. I ask Mommy if I need to count and she says no, she'll tell me to turn around. I count anyways, but in my head. I get all the way to fifty when she tells me she's almost ready. I try to remember what the room looked like before I went to the corner. Grey walls. Grey floors. A square drain in the middle. Chad kneeling on one side, and the box of dolls on the other. The stairs that go up to the kitchen in the middle. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to remember every detail. Mommy tells me to turn around.

I turn. "Chad's standing," I shout. "The box of yuck is on the dryer. And that's Chad's brother!" I point and laugh. "I don't know who they are, but there are one, two, three other kids down here. They're all sleeping. One boy and one, two girls. I like her hair. It looks like pink and blue crayons."

"The box of yuck is empty," Chad's brother says and pushes a button on the dryer. Chad makes another groaning sound and a big red welt that looks like a bear paw shows up on his face. He pretends to cry again. "That's curious," Chad's brother says.

I ask my mommy how I did and she says very well, but I didn't tell her what was the same. I look around the room again. Nothing looks the same, I tell her. She walks down the stairs. Her face is smiling and frowning at the same time. "What about me?" she asks.

"You're not the same at all."

She laughs and says that's right. I ask if I won the game and she says yes. For my prize she says I get to stay in the kitchen and eat pudding by myself while she runs an errand. My mommy that doesn't look like my mommy anymore pours a smelly liquid out of a red can on the sleeping kids. I ask her what it is and she says it's something to keep them warm. My mommy is nice.

She leads me upstairs. Chad's brother picks up Chad and carries him after us. Mommy says not to let anyone else in the house while she's gone. I follow them to the front door and shut it behind them. Before I do I see the big bowl of food left by our neighbor. The fuzzy trees have turned black.

"Yuck."

{Z}ygosis

“Siasch oadriax g-chis-ge gameganza. Malprg oiad pashs plapli oiad izizop!”

“English, esiasch. We are all friends here.”

“Friends?!” he spits. “You consider these ants *friends*? You have fallen far, brother. What happened to the Gassagen that would split these husks without a second thought? Or have you been locked inside that vessel so long you’ve forgotten your true form?”

“I have forgotten nothing, Mastema.” My voice echoes off the bricks. The young boy I’m soon to wear cowers in a corner. Good, I think. I’ll taste that emotion for days. “I’d bite my tongue if I were you, brother.”

“I will do no such thing,” he sulks. “This was your plan after all; *your* decision. I was perfectly content choosing whomever to walk inside, but you had to try them out, you had to *feel* what it was like as… as these animals!” He backhands the boy who whimpers in pain as a fresh bruise forms on his ear and another blossoms on his arm. “And why these?” Mastema continued. “What is so special about these?” He pulls at his own face and ears. “Is it the blood? The similar features? What is it?!”

“For years we have called each other brother. Don’t you want to know what it feels like to really be so? To be blood related? To share not only our history, but our present?” I place a hand on his shoulder. My thumbnail peels back with an audible pop. “And it would be nice to feel the body age for once. Unlike you I don’t get that luxury. I’m so sick of this empty withering.” I shake the nail loose and smile. Flecks of flesh drip from my cheeks.

He turns and faces the furnace. “You’ll forget who you are like you’ve already forgotten your name.”

I feel the heat rising in my borrowed limbs. Black coagulated blood pulses in broken veins. “I remember my name, *brother*. I remember what He called me. But I am not one of His anymore.”

He turns back to me with an insult quivering on his tongue. Black eyes bore holes into mine. There is a long silence only disturbed but the occasional whimpering of the boy.

“Will you shut him up?” I say.

Mastema looks to the boy and winks. The boy raises both hands in protest and mumbles something in broken sobs.

“Wait,” I say. “Why can’t he talk?”

Mastema takes a step behind the boy and uses both hands to pry open his mouth. A pool of blood pours out of a severed muscle. “Your pet got a little carried away,” he says with a grin.

“Greta,” I growl. She appears from the top of the stairs. She’s carrying a sprig of lavender and holding the hand of herself. “Why?!” I shout.

“I’m sorry, Cain,” one says. “He came to me like that,” the other continues.

“Explain.”

“You told me not to hurt the boy,” says one with her head bowed. “So I didn’t,” says the other. “But under binding he seems to have hurt... *himself*.”

I cross the room and push a graying finger into her chest. “Are you telling me he bit his own tongue?”

They both shake their heads. “It just... fell off,” they say in unison.

“Curious,” Mastema mumbles behind me.

I take a deep breath, a useless habit that I’ve been unable to quit. “Fine,” I say through grit teeth. The boy is looking up at me with watering eyes. “I’ve dealt with worse.”

“Like four days of rot in Bethany,” says Mastema with a laugh.

I cringe. The memory lingers like a burnt image of the first sun. “Is everything else ready?” I ask the women.

“Yes,” she says. “Except one,” says the other.

“One what?”

She retreats up the stairs and returns with four tiny grey urns. Red writing glows on three of them. “Offering,” she says. “We have three of the four,” says the other.

I feel Mastema begin to say something and I raise my hand. “Where is the fourth?!”

“I don’t know,” they say. “I think the Sinned delivered one outside of our watch.”

Angers manifests itself as a fist into the brick wall. My hand crumples, brittle knuckles pulverized to dust. One long bone breaks through the skin like a dry glacier. I feel nothing but rage. “You do understand it won’t work without four, right?!” I hiss.

They nod.

“And without a fourth this vessel will die and I’ll be stuck in limbo until *he*,” I point to Mastema. “Finds a suitable replacement.” He squeezes down one eye in an awful wink that makes my skin bubble. “And who knows how long that will be?!”

“Yes, *who* knows,” he laughs.

I glare at him until he gets bored and looks away. The room seems to shrink in on me. A coffin’s lid closing. The furnace belches a plume of smoke. “All my planning, all the manipulations. I even risked sacred grounds to neutralize the holy. And for what? So it can all be thrown away due to *your* carelessness?!” The women are shaking now. The boy openly weeps on his knees. “I just wanted to feel again! I wanted to know what it would be like to have … to have …,” I look at Mastema with eyes that can’t cry. “To have a true brother.”

“I’m sorry -,” one of the women says, but is cut short as I drag the broken bone shard across her throat. Crimson rivulets stream down her chest. “We didn’t mean to -,” says the other, but she too is cut short.

Mastema crosses the room and puts an arm around my shoulder. I feel my collarbone separate and crack. “Listen, brother,” he whispers into my ear. “You can still have a body with a beating heart.” He motions towards his twin whose eyes widen. “But, I fear your plan for us to be *family* is currently lost.”

“But how?” I ask.

He steps away and lifts one of the women into the fire. “By sacrificing a sibling,” he says.

“But they are not even themselves anymore.”

“These?” he asks lifting the second woman and placing her on top of the first. “No, these are just annoyances.” A knob is spun as blue and red flames lick up the sides of the bodies.

“Then who?” I feel my ankles giving way. This body is collapsing in on itself.

Mastema crosses the room and helps me onto the rollers. They look like the furnace’s metal tongue. It’s fitting, I think. He puts his hands on my face using his thumbs to force my mouth into a smile. “Did you really think I would want to spend time as a teenager, esiasch? To grow old in this vessel? To be weak?” He shakes his head. “If that is something *you* want I’ll be happy to oblige, but I cannot tolerate humility. You know that.”

He puts a finger into my forehead and pushes me back until I’m lying flat on the metal. “What are you planning?” I ask through a mouth that is slow to move.

“I’ll sacrifice myself, brother.” He leans over me. His eyes are black and empty. “Though sacrifice isn’t the best word, is it?” A laugh vomits out of a dry mouth. “I’ll *expel* this worthless shell, and in exchange for completing your ritual and giving you *that*,” he points to the boy in the corner, “You will promise to find the most influential of this tribe and prepare that vessel for me.” He reaches down and grabs the four urns and places them on my chest. “Just like you have done countless times before.” He separates the purple weed into three pieces. He places one on his tongue, and another into my mouth. I raise my hand to protest, but he pushes it down with his own. “I’d ask if you have any objections,” Mastema says, putting the heel of his other hand into my throat. I feel my Adams apple burst like a ripe grape. “But seeing as you are in no condition to argue, we’ll just accept my proposal and move on.”

He lets go of my hand and begins pushing this body along the tongue into the open mouth at my head. I reach up and tap each of his eyes gently, then outline the pattern of his mouth in an upward smile. My other hand mimics the gesture on my heart.

Click. Click. Scraaatch.

The smell of burning fiber fills the room as my blonde hair turns brown, then black, and then to white ash that floats around the room like

moths.

When I awake seconds later I'm kneeling in the corner, a sprig of lavender mashed in the bloody pool of a tongue-less mouth. I try to look up, but my body rejects the idea and resolves to stare at the floor for a moment longer. Then, like screaming beneath the ocean's waves consciousness slowly fights its way to the surface. The head lolls on a stiff neck and then rolls backward. The eyes are foggy and unfocused. Thick drool cascades out of a slack mouth, and a broken nose wheezes with each breath.

And that's when I feel it.

My first breath. Warm air venting out of the oversized furnace passes through clotted nostrils and down into lungs that expand eagerly. Saliva and blood trickle down the back of my throat and mix with the acid of an active stomach. I feel nauseous. It's exhilarating. I heave onto the floor in violent retches and cry tears of joy. The pain of broken limbs and deep bruising sweeps into my brain. I'm in agony. I'm in heaven.

I blink and my eyes focus. The metal tongue is empty save for my brother, my twin, who sits on the edge and leans back into the mouth. "Remember," he says. "The *most* influential," and winks. There's a scream as his back catches fire. He pushes himself further into the mouth until only his legs jut out, kicking and writhing. Two blackened hands appear briefly along the ridge of the metal lip, just long enough for him to pull his legs into the fire.

I blink. I *actually* blink and feel the lids caressing my eyes. A new wafting of burned skin smells caresses my face. Above me the sounds of footsteps break through the silence. I try to stand. I feel wobbly, weak. The sensation sends shivers up my spine, which themselves cause an entirely new wave of thrilling emotions. Oh, to be alive again! Each tiny movement sends a new barrage of stimuli that I'd forgotten had existed for countless years. My head swims. The footsteps get closer.

I pull myself upright on the metal rollers and take a few uneasy steps towards the stairs. My momentum gets the best of me and I fall awkwardly across the room and bang against the large metal door. I hear the tiniest yelp from inside those insulated walls. The footsteps are halfway down the stairs.

Pushing off the door and finding unstable feet, I hobble back to the center of the room. A severe looking woman stands at the bottom of the stairs, her hands on her hips. Above her in the doorway a great beast of a dog sits on his haunches and stares. As if ignited by the sun itself, my back erupts in fiery pain.

She tilts her head and smiles. "Sympathetic twins," she says as smoke fills the room. "One in a million, but if someone has been around as long as you have it's bound to happen." The smile fades from her lips. I backpedal and careen against the metal door again. The dog lets out a low growl.

I try to speak but the words are garbled. She takes a step towards me and I cower. The smell of burnt hair fills the room. I want to apologize, to beg forgiveness, but the words come out wet and broken. The fire moves to my neck and arms and I fall to the floor. The pain is amazing. I crawl on battered knees until I find the metal rollers and pull myself up again. I'm nearly blind from the flames charring and eating at the flesh around my eyes.

And then she's there, pushing me down onto my back and sliding me along the rollers. The flames reflect in eyes that have masked more pain than a nation of people should ever experience. "You took my father," she spits. "My mother. She knew, so you took her too." I'm nearly in the furnace's mouth. "You took my friends. My neighbors. You took my husband for no reason." I grab onto the metal lip to keep myself from going all the way into the flames. "I won't let you take anyone else!" she screams. With one final thrust she pushes me into the gaping hole. "Teloah aqlo malpirgi," she says. And smiles.

A Story to Scare My Son

by ovenfriend

Winner - Best Monthly Winner of 2014
Winner - October Monthly Contest

“Son, we need to have a chat about Internet Safety.” I slowly crumpled down onto the floor next to him. His laptop was open and he was playing Minecraft on a public server. His eyes were locked into the action. Comments scrolled down the side of the screen in a chat box. “Son, can you stop your game for a minute?”

He exited the world, closed the laptop, and looked up at me. "Dad, is this going to be another cheesy scary story?"

"Whhaaaat?" I faked hurt feelings for a second, and then grinned at him, "I thought you liked my cautionary tales?" He grew up listening to my stories about children who encountered witches, ghosts, werewolves, and trolls. Like many generations of parents, I used scary stories to reinforce morals and teach lessons about safety. Single dads like me should use all the parenting tools at their disposal.

He scrunched his face a little, "They were fine when I was six. But now that I'm getting older, they don't scare me anymore. They seem kinda silly. If you are going to tell a story about the Internet, can you make it really, really scary!?” I squinted at him incredulously. He folded his arms, “Dad. I’m ten and I can handle it."

"hmm… okay... I’ll try."

I began, “Once upon a time, there was a boy named Colby….” His expression indicated that he wasn't impressed with the terror of the introduction. He sighed deeply and settled in for one of Dad’s cheesy stories. I continued...

> Colby went online and joined several children's websites. After a while, he started talking to other kids in-game and on the message boards. He made friends with another ten year old boy named Helper23. They liked the same video games and shows. They laughed at each other's jokes. They explored new games together.
>
> After several months of friendship, Colby gave Helper23 six diamonds in a game they were playing. This was a very generous gift. Colby's birthday was coming up and Helper23 wanted to send him a cool present in real life. Colby figured it wouldn't hurt to give Helper23 his home address - as long as he promised not to tell it to any strangers or grownups. Helper23 swore he wouldn't tell anyone else, not even his own parents, and set about mailing the package.

I paused the story and asked my son, "Do you think that was a good idea?” “No!" he said shaking his head vigorously. In spite of himself, he was getting into the story.

> Well neither did Colby. Colby felt guilty about giving away his home address - and his guilt began to grow. And grow. By the time he put on his pajamas the next night, his guilt and fear were larger than anything else in his life. He resolved to admit the truth to his parents. The punishment would be steep, but it was worth it to have a clear conscience. He squirmed in his bed as he waited for his parents to tuck him in.

My son knew the scary part was coming up. In spite of his tough talk, he leaned forward wide-eyed. I spoke quietly and deliberately.

> He heard all the noises of the house. The washing machine bounced around in the laundry room. Branches scraped against the brick outside his room. His baby brother cooed in the nursery. And there were some other noises he couldn't... quite... pinpoint. Finally, his dad’s footsteps echoed down the hall. “Hey Dad?” He called out nervously. “I have something to tell you.”
>
> His dad stuck his head in the doorway at a weird angle. In the darkness, his mouth didn't seem to move and the eyes were all wrong. "Yes, son" The voice was way off, too. "Are you okay, Dad?" The boy asked. "Uh-huh" sung the father in his strangely affected voice. Colby pulled his covers up defensively. "Ummm... Is Mom around?"
>
> "Here I am!" Mom's head popped into the doorway below Dad's. Her voice was an unnatural falsetto. "Were you about to tell us that you gave our home address to Helper23? You shouldn't have done that! We TOLD you never to give out personal information on the Internet!"
>
> She continued, "He wasn't really a kid! He just pretended to be one. Do you know what he did? He came to our house, broke in, and murdered both of us! Just so he could spend some time with you!"

A fat man in a wet jacket emerged in the child's doorway holding the two severed heads. Colby shrieked and gasped as the man dropped the heads on the ground, unsheathed his knife, and moved into the room to work on the boy.

My son screamed too. He twisted his hands defensively over his face. But we were just getting started with the story.

After several hours, the boy was almost dead and his screams had become whimpers. The killer noticed the wailing of a baby in another room and removed his knife from Colby. This was a special treat. He had never murdered a baby before and was excited about the prospect. Helper23 left Colby to die and followed the cries through the house like a homing beacon.

In the nursery, he walked to the crib, picked the baby up, and held it in his arms. He moved towards the changing table to get a better look. But as he held the baby, the crying died down. The baby looked up and smiled. Helper23 had never held a baby, but he gently bounced it in his arms like a pro. He wiped his bloody hands on the blanket so he could stroke the baby's cheek, "Hey there, sweet little guy." The beautiful rage of sadism melted into something warmer and softer.

He walked out of the nursery, took the baby home, named him William, and raised him as his very own.

After I finished the story, my son was visibly shaken. Between ragged staccato breaths, he stammered, "But Dad, MY name's William." I gave him a classic dad-wink and tousled his hair. "Of course it is, son." William ran up the stairs to his bedroom in a fury of sobs.

But deep down... I think he liked the story.

That wasn't my husband who slept next to me last night.

by TorontoScared1

Runner Up - Best Monthly Winner of 2014

Part 1

My name is Peter Tillman, and I'm terrified. I am a physicist here in Toronto and teach at one of the best Universities in Canada. I've had a very successful career and have been offered tenure, which I'm still debating. I was very luck to be born into a very wealthy family and met the man of my dreams about 8 years ago in my early 20s. We've been married for approximately 5 years, and he's my everything.

He makes me laugh, he makes me smile, he sometimes makes me cry (who doesn't have that story to tell about their partner), and he's my partner in crime. The man that came home to me yesterday is not my husband, and I have no idea what's going on.

Christopher (my husband), left for a business trip five days ago. He's a patent lawyer and occasionally has to travel for work. He left Pearson international airport and called me when he landed at Wein-Flughafen (Vienna's main airport). I have a bit of separation anxiety when it comes to being away from him, and he has no problem catering to this. He called me after he got through customs, and when he got to the hotel. Nothing long, just a "hey honey, I'm here" kinda call. We always preferred phone calls since we text with everyone else and decided that calling would be our thing.

I went about the last four days as I usually would: doing chores, teaching the couple summer courses that I've been unfortunately assigned, and picking out new colours for the kitchen. His mum is footing the bill for the renovations, so why not. It's her anniversary present to us.

Yesterday Christopher was scheduled to fly back to Toronto. He called me from Vienna after he got into the lounge at the airport and told me that he was super tired and was going to pass out on the plane. I was happy that he was finally going to get some rest after what sounded like an atrociously busy trip. Poor guy, he works so hard.

His flight was scheduled to arrive at 11pm, and I had an early class to teach today, so I decided to make dinner and leave it in the fridge for him, and then curl up with the poorly written physics textbook that I was editing for a friend. I realized that 11pm had come and gone and I didn't get word from Christopher, but I just assumed that his flight was delayed. He had a layover in London at Heathrow Airport, and I know that they have some pretty brilliant thunderstorms this time of year, so I just figured that his flight was delayed. When 12pm rolled around, I started to get a bit more worried, but then all of my feelings were allayed. I got a text. I know that Christopher was tired, and that he usually doesn't sleep well on flights, so I assumed that he just wanted to reassure me, that's why he texted, instead of calling.

He said: Jweust Landod, will be hom sune.

Poor guy was so tired, he couldn't even type straight. I even got him a new iPhone for his birthday and assumed that he was still having trouble adapting to the touchscreen having been a loyal blackberry fan for so many years.

I went to the bathroom, took out my contacts and fell asleep. I don't know how long after receiving that text I fell asleep, but I was out cold. A few hours later I heard the latch turn, and I heard Chris's usually heavy footsteps climb up the stairs. He went to the bathroom, and did his usual routine, except he left the water running. I thought that was a bit strange. He's usually VERY particular about turning off the taps so as to not waste water, not because of the bills, but because of the whole environmentalism kick that he'd been on for the past couple of years.

I was drifting in and out of sleep, but I wanted to see him before I fully passed out. He came into the room, and something seemed different. Nothing that scared me, but just seemed off.

I have terrible vision and my glasses were not near the bed since I normally wore contacts. I looked over and his upper lip looked swollen, like if he had been stung by a bee, and I could see a lot more gum and teeth than normal and had a very broad smile...like he missed me and was glad to see me. I asked him, "babe, are you ok, what's up with your lip?" He quickly told me not to worry, and it was just chapped from being on the plane. I agreed and still half asleep drifted off again.

About 2 hours later I rolled over and noticed that Chris' back was towards me, whatever. Nothing strange. That's when I put my arm around him. He felt....thicker. That's the only way to describe it. I know what my man feels like, and he just felt like a thicker/broader version of him. My general level of unease was starting to get stronger at this point but still not being fully awake, I just chalked it up to nothing.

This morning I woke up and Christopher was gone. His suitcase was still there, he had changed his clothes, but he was gone. I called him, no answer. He however quickly texted me back the following

Et thhe Gym, Loft irly, wull be hume ofter ue leave.

Good I thought, maybe he could work off some of that extra weight I felt on him last night, and chuckled to myself.

I went about my regular routine, and was just about to step out the door when I saw his suitcase again. He had left it on the landing by the door and I guess he just wanted it there, so he could sort it in the living room. As I was leaving a faint musty smell hit me.

It was like if someone had left steak out in the sun for a couple hours. I was already half way out the door, so I felt like it was coming from outside, but when I turned my face towards his suitcase it got so much worse. The smell wasn't a steak being left out for a couple hours, but a couple days. It reeked. I picked up the suitcase only to realize that he had left his lock on it, and I didn't have the keys, so I moved it into the Garage, just so it was out of the house.

As I was about to get into the car, I got another text from Christopher:

i Loweve Yu, Sii you Sune.

I texted back: When you get home, check your suitcase, it stinks and the handle has some kind of residue on it.

I still found it strange that he would text.

About 10 minutes after I got into the car, my phone rang. Chris was calling me.

Me: Hello?

Chris: Hey Babe, so sorry that I didn't get a chance to call you, you must be crazy worried?

Me: Why? Are you ok?

Chris: Yeah, I've been stuck here in London, just getting onto my plane to come home, can you come meet me at the airport?

I froze, I nearly dropped the phone and almost ran my car off the road.

Me: WHAT? What do you mean you're still in London, is this a joke. That's not funny Christopher. You came home last night, I saw you, I spoke to you. Yes I'm a heavy sleeper, but don't shit around. What's going on.

Chris: Um, listen. He put his phone on speaker, and I could hear a woman in a thick english accent announcing "and Gentleman this is the final boarding call for Flight BA203 to Toronto, Could Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Colridge please come to the British Airways desk on the main concourse."

I stopped the car. I was dead silent. What's going on, who did I sleep next to.

Me: Christopher, get home, I'm scared, I need to see you. Call me when you're at the airport, every thing is ok, I just need to see you.

Chris: *chuckle* Ok babe, calm down, I'll be home soon. I should be there by 9pm.

He chuckled because he figured my anxiety was getting the better of me. I didn't want to freak him out about what happened last night and the texts and who I had spoken to earlier on the phone.

I'm going to work now, I'm not going back to that house. I'm going to the airport as soon as I can to meet Christopher, if it really is Christopher. I don't know what's going on anymore. I'm a physicist, a man of science, and none of this makes sense to me.

I haven't been genuinely scared like this since I was a child. What's going on?

UPDATE: Final text from "Chris"

I'm aAAt home, witing for yo1u. Won will u b bock?

UPDATE 1730 EST: I just got back from the lab. Two of my colleagues want a chance to inspect the suitcase, but I'll hold out on that for now. They've done two cultures with what they were able to get from under my nails and from the palm of my left hand. They doubt they'll be able to find anything, because of how long it's been since I touched the suitcase but they'll let me know as soon as they see anything.

UPDATE 1745: Christopher messed up his arrival time, he just landed. Heading to the airport now. Told him not to leave without me.

Part 2

The good news: science seems to be a useful tool in all of this.

The bad news: it's raising more questions that it's answering.

I know a lot of you have referenced the mold stories which deal with demonic possession, but after what's happened today, I think we're dealing with something very different.

Christopher called me when he landed and I rushed to the airport. By the time that I got there he had already cleared customs and was waiting for me. He had his bag. I have never been happier and more confused to see that beat up suitcase of his which I've tried countless times to replace. When I saw him, I knew it was him. No fat lip, no odour, no unexplained weight gain. I ran to him and threw my arms around him. God I missed him. I was still weary, but the part of me that promised to love and to honour was overpowering the part of me that was absolutely terrified about what happened last night.

I rushed him to the car, and threw his suitcase in the trunk. It didn't stink and it didn't have any residue on it, and I just wanted to get back on the road to explain to him what was happening.

As we rushed down the highway, he asked me what was wrong, what could possibly have upset me to the point that I was acting like a total bag of nerves. I explained everything from the smell, to the other "Christopher" to my posting on reddit, to giving the samples at the lab. He was completely silent. Didn't say a word the entire time.

Then he turned to me and asked if I had taken acid or if I had smoked meth. I had some substance abuse problems when I was younger and Chris met me at the tail end of it all. I could see that he didn't believe a word that I was saying. I begged and pleaded with him to believe me, but he just remained silent and stared dead ahead. I could see that he was getting angrier by the moment, thinking that I was making up the entire thing.

"God dammit Peter, I'm tired, I'm jet lagged, and I've been stuck in an airport for almost a day, I don't need this shit as soon as I get back. Can we just go home, I'll take a shower, and we'll go to bed, and everything will be ok."

Absolutely not, no way in hell was I going back to the house. Or should I? I started questioning my own sanity. Maybe I did make the whole thing up nothing about the situation made sense, and I hadn't experienced any side effects from the "exposure" to whatever was on the suitcase handle. THE SUITCASE!! I moved the suitcase into the garage!! I had forgotten about it after being shattered by the way that Christopher was reacting to the situation. If we went to the house, I could show him the suitcase and he would believe me!!

I calmly turned to him, "ok, remember I told you about the suitcase? If we go back home and your suitcase is there, will you believe me?!"

I think it was mostly just lack of sleep and exhaustion, coupled with a desire to just get home that made him agree that if the suitcase was there, he would believe me.

I gunned it down that highway. 145km at one point, I didn't care. I just wanted to show him, and get the hell out of there.

I pulled into the drive and hit the garage door button on my visor, knowing, feeling, 100% convinced that I was about to be vindicated. The garage door opened up and nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The suitcase wasn't there. I ran out of the car and tore the garage apart. Maybe it had rolled somewhere? Maybe I had forgotten where I put it. I searched for a good 5 minutes and then just turned blank faced to him. Christopher was pissed. I hadn't seen him this angry in a while.

"Peter! this isn't funny anymore. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I just want to go to sleep, get in the house and just drop it. I love you, and I'm going to take your word for it that you're clean, but don't press me."

I just stood there staring at him as he walked in the house. I didn't know what to do. Chris immediately made for the shower, we didn't even take his real suitcase out of the car, we just went into the house and I sat in the living room. Nothing felt weird or out of place, and the only smell was the faint vanilla scent from the Airwick in the wall. It was about 7pm by this point.

Chris got out of the shower and came downstairs wearing his towel. Hearing his footsteps down the stairs terrified me, I froze on the couch and was just relieved to see that he had his normal physique.

"Are you coming to bed?" He asked, the tone in his a voice much nicer and much more sweet than before. It's amazing how much good a shower can do for a man.

I saw this as my opportunity to convince him to leave the house. I pleaded with him one more time, and I could just see a look of resigned

exhaustion on his face. "ok Babe, we'll go to a hotel. It'll clear your mind and maybe you'll stop being such a drama queen"

I LOVE YOU was the only thing that I blurted out before I broke down crying. I think the relief of finally convincing him to leave was vindication of the insanity that I was descending into.

He pulled on some clothes and I packed a bag, he didn't need anything because he still had clean clothes in his suitcase that was still in the trunk of the car.

We got into the car and he gave me a kiss, "man, you're high maintenance sometimes, one bad dream and you lose your shit. You're a logical person, I've never met a more staunch atheist, and you're acting like a damn ghost slept with you. Let's go to the King Edward".

It was my favourite hotel in the city, but because it was only 10 minutes away, we only went there for parties and lunch, and rarely got the chance to spend the night. The rooms are amazing.

As we drove, I started to calm down. Having Christopher back and being away from the house made me feel better. THE PHONE!! In the panic to get home and tell him everything, I forgot to show him the weird texts that I had received. I quickly took out my cell and scrolled through the texts. Nothing. No texts from him,nothing.I didn't want to tell him anything because he would just continue to think that I was losing it and I didn't want to look like a bigger fool than I had already been. I know I had sent and received those texts from him, I know I did. But frankly I just wanted to get to the hotel and unwind. Maybe I could make sense of this tomorrow.

The King Edward has a beautiful foyer dominated by an enormous oil portrait of King Edward VII. As we made our way towards the check in desk, the clerk smiled at us and said "Mr. Tillman, how was your evening? And I presume this is Dr. Tillman." She was looking at me.

Christopher and I just stood there in silence. How did she know our names, we made no reservations, and we surely didn't come there enough for her to know us by name.

"Um, I'm fine, I'm sorry, have me met?" Christopher looked at her quizzically, then turned to me.

"Oh, I, well, of course Sir, you just stepped out and told me that you were going to get your husband." Her smile had turned to a look of confusion.

Christopher just stared at me. He nor I knew what to say.

"I'm sorry gentleman, is everything ok?" The poor woman had no idea what was going on, and frankly neither did I. Chris just stood there, I could see his face change. I could see that he was starting to believe me. I could see his opinion of my night was changing.

I spoke first, "oh yes, we're fine, but we lost our room key, can you please give us another one, he's so clumsy sometimes" I knew this was my chance to get to the bottom of this, and frankly we were in a hotel known for VIP guests and great security, so there was no way we were going to be attacked. I felt safe, but asked if the attendant would come with us up to the room.

"Of course sir, not a problem, would you be able to provide some photo ID just to verify your identify. I do recognize you, however I just have to ask, it's hotel policy."

"Of course," I said, and turned to Christopher. He was just staring straight ahead, still not understanding fully what was going on. I grabbed his hand, it was cold and clammy, "Honey, I need your drivers license."

"Oh sure, yeah, um, ok here you go." He awkwardly fished his wallet out of his back pocket and took out his license.

After a couple of minutes a new key was generated and the lady handed Christopher his licence. He still hadn't said a word, and just kept his grip on the handle of his suitcase. I know he was trying to not panic, and just go with it, but the full impact of my panic had been dumped on his jet-lagged mind, and I could see he wasn't handling it well.

The three of us got into the elevator and the check-in clerk hit the 9th floor button. Everything seemed normal, and the beauty and cleanliness of the hotel made nothing seem out of place. Christopher just kept staring at me. His eyes betrayed his worry, but I made the "just go with it" face. We left the elevator and approached a room in the middle of the hallway. The clerk put the key card in, and the light on the lock turned a florescent green. She opened the door and almost fell backward.

The smell was unbearable. It stank, it reeked, it pulsated with the stench of rotten meat. Both Christopher and I made retching noises and backed into the hallway.

"Oh my god what is that?!" The clerk looked at Christopher with a sense of horror, looking like she wanted to hit him for what she presumed he had done in, or to the room. With hand over her mouth she yelled in a muffled tone, "Sir what IS that smell?!"

I knew the smell, I knew it all too well. I just stood there, taking it all in, feeling the full burning feeling at the back of my throat.

"I have no idea, that's definitely not from me!" Christopher shot back at her. He was a good 10 feet behind me at this point, the smell being too unbearable for him.

The clerk entered the room, and looked around. I followed right behind her. It was spotless. The bed hadn't been touched, the towels were still folded neatly, and the minibar hadn't been disturbed. The smell began to waft into the hall and the attendant ushered me out, left the room, and closed the door. Chris and the attendant just stood there gasping, trying to regain their breath, and I remained stock still. Remembering the night before.

We made our way back to the lobby, the hotel clerk looking pissed as hell, Chris standing there in a mixture of nausea and shock, and myself just terrified that I would run into whoever the other "Christopher" was. I knew I was right, and from the look on his face Christopher believed me.

The elevator opened, and I looked at the attendant.

"We're sorry for the smell Sir, I realize that there's nothing you could have done to cause it, it's probably the toilet backed up or something. We'll find you another room, the hotel isn't too busy tonight. "

"Ok," I replied, "thank you, we'll go for a walk, we just need to clear our minds." I held Christopher's hand for dear life, and guided him to the lobby seating area.

"I'm so sorry Babe, I love you so much, I'm so sorry I didn't believe you." He was just so apologetic. "I need a drink," he continued, "but fucking hell, I need to change my clothes, that smell, that smell is just burned into them."

I sat in the lobby while Christopher made his way to the men's room, suitcase in tow. I had line of sight of the room, and felt safe surrounded by the Hotel staff and various other attendants.

Less than 2 minutes passed and Christopher came running out of the bathroom, white as a sheet. "We need to go, and we need to go NOW"

He dragged me by the hand into the street. "Babe, calm down, whats wrong?!" I asked as he dragged me towards our car.

"There was two of EVERYTHING. Two toothbrushes, two shirts, two sets of pants, two of every one of my, TWO OF EVERYTHING" He continued to drag me towards the car. I just went with it. It had been one hell of a night, and I wasn't going to object to anything.

We sat in the car, Christopher panting. "What do you mean there was two of everything?" I asked.

"I opened my suitcase and all of my clothes, my shoes, my everything, there was two sets of them." It was only then that I realized what he was talking about, and that he had left his suitcase in the men's room.

"Someone's been in the suitcase, and, and, well, replicated every fucking thing I own. I don't know what's going on, but this shit isn't right. We're going to Anthony's"

He hit the gas, hard. I felt myself pressed into the seat of the car as it accelerated out of the parking lot and merged onto the highway. Anthony lived about 20 minutes away, regular driving. We were going to make it in 10. Anthony was a physician, a neurologist, and really, knowing that we were not going home, and would have medical care, if needed, just made me feel better.

Christopher looked like he was going to cry, mixed with the anger of a man who had been wronged. His privacy had been invaded, someone was pretending to be him, and he had no idea what was going on. I put my hand on his thigh and squeezed, trying to reassure him. In the 8 years that I had known him, I had never seen him like this.

I called Anthony.

Me: Anthony, it's Peter, we're coming over, Christopher and I need to spend the night, I'll explain when I get there.

Anthony: Oh...Um. Ok. Are you alright? Do either of you need anything?

Me: No, just make sure that there's parking in the driveway.

Anthony: Sure thing, see you soon. Tell Chris thanks again for the gift.

I assumed Christopher had sent Anthony a gift from Vienna, he usually sent things back for him whenever he travelled. He's been the big brother that Anthony needed many times throughout his life.

We pulled into the drive. Christopher bolted out of the car and banged on Anthony's door. Anthony opened the door, and Christopher burst in. "Get in Peter and lock the door. Anthony, put on the Alarm system."

Anthony complied and asked what the hell was going on. Christopher started,

Chris: We've had a fucking crazy night Tony, we need to stay here, something really strange is going on, I don't feel safe.

Anthony: Why?! What could have happened in the past hour to make you this way?

Chris: The pasthour?

Anthony: Yeah, you looked a little out of it when you dropped the bag off, but I figured it was the jet lag. At least the lip looks a little less swollen, good to see the bendryl I gave you is working. And damn, glad to see you showered, you stank! Mind you no one smells good after a day of travel!

Christopher nearly fainted. He just fell back into the chair that was behind him.

Me: Anthony, did you let Christopher in, when he came here an hour ago?

Anthony: Of course, he gave me the gift bag, and I told him to come in so I could take a look at his lip. He said he was just having a reaction to some pineapple in the salad from the plane (a pineapple allergy runs in Christopher's family, and Anthony is aware of this), so I just gave him some benadryl and told him to drink lots of water.

Me: Did he look different otherwise? Was he fatter?

Anthony: What? What do you mean? Did he look any fatter than he is now? No.

Me: What was he driving?

Anthony: Your BMW. your car.

Me: You mean that car, that we have parked in your drive way right now?

Anthony: Yes, he said he was going to get you and then go to dinner at the King Edward. Christopher Jospeh Tillman, what the hell is going on?! You two are freaking me out.

Me: Anthony, I picked up Christopher from the Airport, I've been with him, and with our car all afternoon. That thing that came to the house wasn't Christopher.

Anthony looked at us skeptically, but his medical mind made him realize that there was no way Christopher's lip would look so normal within an hour. I started telling him the story, all the while keeping an eye on Christopher, who had gone from pale white to a strange greenish hue. I could only imagine what was going through his mind.

Just then my phone rang. It was Vass (short for Vasilli), the Chemist that did my palm scraping from earlier on in the day.

Me: Hey Vass, what's up? (its about 8:30pm at this point).

Vass: Are you on campus tomorrow? I need to see you. We have some results back and they're unusual. Nothing that could hurt you, so don't panic about that, but just not....normal.

Me: Vass, tell me what's going on. What did you find? I can't handle anymore suspense after today.

Vass was a very gruff, very bearish Russian man, whom I had known for quite a few years. I had never heard him sound confused or worried. Tonight, his voice shook with both of those emotions. It almost sounded like he was under duress.

Vass: Peter, you're my friend, I don't want to jump to conclusions, but the residue from under your fingernails was human tissue. It was necrotizing, rotting, human tissue. What's your blood type?

Me: O-negative

Vass: this is AB-positive. I think you need to answer some questions for me Peter.

Me: I, um I'm, what? Ok, I'll come into the lab in the morning. Thanks Vass

Vass: No problem, it's a good thing you don't have that suitcase anymore. Goodnight.

As I hung up the phone, I realized I never told Vass that I no longer had the suitcase.

I turned to Christopher, he had the gift bag that "he" had given to Anthony an hour earlier in his hand. It was filled with cheesy Austrian souvenirs, and nothing really of note.

Except for a card in an envelope. Chris opened the envelope and scanned the card

"What the fuck!" Chris yelled, and handed me the card.

It wasn't hand written, it was typed

6:08 - Aroive at Aeropurt

6:44 - Dey git Home

7:33 - HuTel.

7:41 - Gho TO rooUm.

7:58 - LEave Kwik. Gho TO car

8:15 - Nthony

8:33 - Fone rIng - Kemist

11:45 - ME

It’s 10:45 as I type this on my iPad. Anthony, myself and Chris are sitting in a Tim Hortons (Coffee Shop) across the road from 52 Division (a police precinct). Waiting.

Part 3

10:45pm - Tuesday July 28, 2014

Christopher, Anthony and myself were all crammed into a booth inside the coffee shop. Confusion, anger, fear, hatred, every single visceral emotion that pulsates in a situation of unknowing flew between the three of us. Virtually no words were exchanged. I think we all sat there, contemplating our own mortality. If this thing, if this "person" knew our every move and exactly where we were going to be, how could we do anything about it? What force did we have to fight it/he?

I held tightly onto Christopher's hand. His normally warm loving hands were cold and clammy with fear. We were across the road from the Police station, but how would we explain ourselves? We had brought the note, but what would the introduction be?

"Oh Hello officer, my husband and all of his posessions, including a full sized sedan were replicated and used to terrify his cousin, a high ranking neurologist specializing in pediatrics at Sick Kids Hospital." I couldn't imagine the reaction, I could only imagine that we were going to either be laughed at, or jeoardize Anthony's career if we said anything. "The brain doctor is seeing shit, and thinks that his cousin is a dopelganger...that I may or may not have slept next to...while my REAL husband was in Vienna. No, seriously, believe us. Oh I teach Physics too!"

Fuck, this truly was a Catch-22, no way to help ourselves, I couldn't even begin to think of how we would start.

Anthony isn't one for silences, he's a very talkative man and I could feel the tension was getting to him. Saw open a cranium, play around in there and stitch it back up? Sure, no problem. Waiting for a seemingly paranormal creature in a coffee shop in the middle of the largest Canadian metropolis, hell no.

"I'm going to order, do you guys want anything?" Anthony asked as he rose from the table.

"Sit the hell down, you aren't going anywhere." Christopher was starting to get angry, he was a lawyer and his legally trained bulldog mind was beginning to get the better of him. I could see that he was beginning to reach his limit with what was going on.

"Chris, you can see me, the counter is what? 2 feet away? We can't just sit here, we have to order, plus I'm parched, it's about 30degrees (85F) out there. You two just keep looking at me, and I'll keep looking at you? Cool?"

"I'll take an IceCap (iced cappuccino for the non-Canadians)," Chris acquiesed.

"I'll just have a coffee," I weakly said. I realized that neither Chris nor I had eaten since this started and we had to force ourselves to eat something. "And a bagel, toasted with butter."

Anthony made his way to the counter, about four steps away, and just to keep everyone's mind at peace and focus on the task at hand, we continued the conversation.

Christopher: So we all agree that he knows we're here, right?

Peter: Absolutely, he knew we were here, before we knew we were coming here.

Anthony: We're in public, the cops are across the road, this is the best place to be. If he's going to try anything all these people would notice and say something. The place is well lit, and once again, Cops, across the road.

He was right. There was little chance one of us would be stabbed or murdered in the middle of a restaurant, but all of us were convinced that "Chris" would show up, espeically after the experience at the Kind Edward Hotel; he came there, he waited, and then he left. He was "going to get his husband (me)," according to the check-in clerk.

Chris looked around Anthony, vigilant as ever. My man. "You know, he's right. This place is pretty busy, especially for a wednesday night."

I took my eyes off Anthony as well, looked behind us, even though the door was in the opposite direction and I swore I wouldn't take my eyes off of it. They were both right, there were a lot of kids, and what looked like an inconsiderate/neglectful woman tending to them all. About four kids, one parent. Typical for that part of downtown. It was a rich city, but like everywhere, there was poverty.

Anthony approached the counter and placed the order. The attendant, unusually happy for 11:00pm (Fuck, 45 minutes), filled the order and as she passed the tray to Anthony looked at him and said, "Don't forget to Roll up the Rim to win!" "Thanks," said Anthony and made the four steps back to our booth.

Sidebar: For those of you who aren't Canadian, "Roll up the Rim to Win," is pretty much a national event. The loyalty american's pay to

Starbucks is reciprocated in Canada with our loyalty to Tim Hortons. It's a national institution. Twice a year they hold a contest where you literally roll up the rim of your coffee cup and see if you've won a prize. Quite like checking under a pop bottle cap to see if you've won a prize. This is what the rolled rim looks like

We sat there and drank our drinks in virtual silence. Just watching the clock. About 10 minutes passed (11:11pm), and I couldn't handle the noise of the damn kids anymore. I looked at Anthony and Chris, "I need a cigarette, can we all go outside? We'll stay by the door, and if anything, it's a straight shot across the parking lot to the cop station, we can make it." They looked at each other, and agreed, the noise from the kids was getting too much, and they could just use the brake instead of sitting there, waiting for our visitor to arrive.

We all stood up, almost in a choreographed manner, no one wanting to be left behind in the cafe. And made our way to the door. We stood right by the entrance, with our car parked in front of us. It had cooled down a fair amount and there was definitely a bit of a nip in the air. Hell this is Canada, nothing surprising there.

"Christopher, open the car, I'm going to grab my sweater from the back seat." He hit the auto opener on his keys and the locks flew open. I approached the vehicle, clearly looking inside to see if anyone was crouched in the backseat, just waiting for me. Nothing. I opened the door, constantly looking back at Anthony and Christopher who were less than a foot away from me at this point, grabbed the sweater and we all walked back to the entrance. I had finished the cigarette in record time and just wanted to get back in the restaurant. Even though we could run to the police station if need be, the silence of the parking lot, coupled with the exposure of being outside just gave me an eerie feeling. Anthony and Christopher agreed with me and we all went back inside.

11:30pm

Damn, the kids were annoying. Christopher and I were just in the initial phases of adoption, and loved children dearly, but these kids wouldn't shut up. Coupled with the tension of what we were waiting for, it started to get too much. Christopher squeezed my hand, "I'm just gonna tell them to shut up, fuck I can't handle this."

"Calm down, focus on the task at hand, let that be white noise." Anthony, our ever patient physician, had a very calming effect on Christopher and this seemed to work.

Every second that passed, every minute that dragged by, we could feel the tension building. Would he come through the door? Would he manifest right in front of us? How would he do it? And the ultimate question? What the hell did "Chris" want with us? what was he trying to extract from us that we could possibly give him?

Was it money? Say so, and I'll write the cheque for you right there. Was it control? Was it power? Was it sexual favours? If it was that, I'd volunteer to do him right then and there if that meant we'd be left alone.

Not a one of us said a word for the next 15 minutes, we sat there in utter silence, the overpowering din of the coffee shop providing what turned out to be rather useful background noise. In hindsight, if the Tim Horton's had been dead silent, we would have had a much harder time being there.

11:45.

We all looked at one another. Nothing. Nothing changed, nothing happened, the din and the noise still continued, people kept placing orders, the overly happy employee kept filling the orders, and just nothing. Christopher kept playing with the car keys, but still, nothing. Anthony finished his coffee and rolled the rim. He froze.

Where it should have said, "Reyassez S'il Vous plait//Please try again" or "You won a donut!" it just said

oNE uAnd oNe is ToO. wWwhY 3?

Anthony just said, "Oh shit," and showed us the rim. The creature knew we were here, he knew how to communicate with us. But he wasn't here. What the hell was he trying to say.

Christopher, Anthony and I looked at one another. Maybe he wasn't going to show up in such a crowded place, and chose to send us a message this way. Maybe we had outsmarted him by picking such a public place, we had screwed up his timeline. Here we were waiti

"Hey Mister, what happened to your lip?"

Those 7 words were like a gong, like the so-called shot heard around the world, fuck they were a canon in the noisy room to us. Chris and I turned around and Anthony, already facing that direction, looked over our shoulders. There was a man sitting in the booth behind ours, his back to us. He was wearing a hat and a jacket with the collar popped. There, standing, looking at him was a girl, no more than six years old staring at his face.

“Mister, why’s your lip so fat? Thats grossssss!”

I have never moved that fast in my life.

“JESUS FUCKING CHRIST RUN!” Was the only thing that Anthony could think to say. Christopher and I shot out of the coffee shop as quickly as we could. Christopher hit the clicker for the car door and the safety of the “beep beep!” that automatic locks make when they open sounded; we all piled into the car. Christopher in the drivers seat, me in the passenger and Anthony in the back.

We hit the start button and the engine came alive with a soft purr. Christopher threw the car into reverse and we gunned it out of the parking lot and straight in the parking lot of the cop station.

All three of us were yelling, nothing was discernable. Christopher was yelling about how the hell did we miss him coming into the Cafe, that seat was definintely empty when we sat down. Anthony was almost on the verge of hyperventilating and kept asking what the fuck we think he wanted. And I just sat there, practially screaming gibberish.

We had come to an abrupt stop in front of the door of the police station. Frozen inside the car. Yes, we know, we should have run inside, but none of us could move. It still boggles my mind that Christopher was able to get the damn car across the road without hitting anyone. Dundas Street is incredibly busy. But still, none of us could move, we just sat there.

Anthony broke the silence.

Anthony: Stay in the car, don’t go inside. We never saw his face, we don’t know what we’re going in there to report. We can’t just walk in and say ‘A man with a fat lip caused a small girl to be grossed out so we ran out of there’ What the fuck do you think the cops are going to think? They’re going to think we’re fucking drugged out of our minds.

Me: Are you fucking kidding me?! The hell with this shit, I’m going inside. I’m done. I can’t

Christopher: Stop! He’s right, we don’t know if that was him. Maybe it was some druggie with fucked up meth teeth, we don’t know anything yet. Sure it happened at 11:45, but what the fuck does that mean.

Anthony: We gotta think this through. Turn off the lights and wait to see if he leaves.

We all sat there, realizing that regardless of how scared we were, regardless of what had happened, we had nothing to tell the cops. We had nothing, we couldn’t tell them about “Chris” coming home, because that story would break down due to total lack of evidence. No texts were on my phone, nothing. We couldn’t tell them about “Chris” dropping the bag off at Anthony’s because the second they asked what he looked like and what he drove, Dr. Anthony Jovid would have to say, “Oh, he looked like the guy standing next to me, and he drove the car I came here in.”

We had nothing.

We sat there, in the car, with nothing left to do but wait.

11:47PM.

We sat there, all of us in shock and pure fear. The cops were less than a stone’s throw away from us, and we knew if we saw anything we’d book it from the car and just go grab a police officer, until then....we had nothing to go on. We just stared at the only entrance to the Tim Hortons we could see, the one we had gone in and out of several times. The one that led to the parking lot where I had that cigarette.

“I’m burning up, I need to cool down, this is getting to me.” Christopher said. I could only imagine how frayed my poor husband’s nerves were at this point, so I reached over and put on the AC. There was no fucking way I would be doing down a window. We had never seen that thing arrive or leave the coffee shop, who knew what he was capable of.

The AC turned on, and once again the hum of the fan filled the car with a much needed noise. And all we did was stare. Stare at that damn door.

“If you’re putting on the AC, I’m gonna put on this sweater, Peter is this yours?” Anthony asked from the back seat.

“Yeah, go head its. Wait! Anthony, what colour is the fucking sweater?!”

Anthony: IT’S BLUE WITH A HOOD.

ME: Get the fuck out of the car now! GO GO GO!!!

I had taken my blue sweater out of MY car when I went for a cigarette while we were still waiting. I was wearing my blue sweater. That was the creature's replication of my blue sweater. We were inside the fucking creature's car. We couldn't tell the difference because there was no difference. This was the car that had driven to Anthony's house when "Chris" delivered the gift bag.

The three of us frantically tried to open the doors but they wouldn't budge. It was like they were welded shut. Christopher reached into the middle console and pulled out the emergency "If you're in a fire in your car use this to break the windshield" hammer I made him buy and pounded away at the glass. Nothing, not even a scratch. We were trapped INSIDE the creatures car.

"PRESS THE FUCKING HORN" screamed Anthony from the back. We were in the police parking lot, they were sure to hear us. But nothing, we tried and tried. We tried screaming, kept trying the doors. Anthony was lying on the backseat trying to kick the door open as hard as he could, but the glass refused to give.

Then suddenly, the smell. That rank, odorous smell. Rotten meat, fetid flesh, acrid, pungent, all consuming came pumping out of the AC vents. I tried to turn off the AC but the car continued to fill with the smell. There was nothing we could do. I could hear Anthony retching in the back seat. This was his first exposure to it and he couldn't handle it. Christopher had covered his nose and mouth with his hand but was trying very hard to hold back vomit.

All three of us kept trying the doors but they were not Moving.

"Oh Fucking hell, look!" screamed Christopher, his voice muffled by his own hand.

Across the road, standing, holding his suitcase, with his hat and coat on, stood "Chris." He was pointing to us. I could almost feel that pointed finger rubbing across my face, I had never been more scared in my entire life. The smell was overpowering, the sight was overpowering, I was praying to faint, just so I wouldn't have to deal with this situation, but my body wouldn't let me.

Then the creature slowly, methodically moved his hand and pointed to another car. To our car, parked in Tim Hortons parking lot. Exactly where this one had been. In the exact spot. Impossible. Utterly impossible. What could this creature do. What was he capable of.

The smell made screaming impossible, so in order to breathe as much as possible, we all just stopped yelling and just looked at the creature "Chris."

He began crossing the road. In smooth, very human, unassuming steps he made his way across the road. He was standing in the parking lot, holding his suitcase and slowly advancing towards us. By now we could all see his trade mark feature.

It was my husband. It was my Christopher. It was the love of my life, but with the most grotesque oversized, swollen upper lip. It looked infected and engorged. I put both my hands on my Christopher, shielding him from the creature that was approaching from the passenger side of the vehicle. He came extremely close.

We were frozen in terror. No one dared moved, Anthony was pressing up against the door opposite to the creature, filled with a fear reserved for children and those in war zones.

And then the creature made it's way to Anthony's passenger side window. Not so close as to touch the window, but close enough for Anthony to know he was the one that the creature wanted. He couldn't scream. He was paralyzed with fear, as we all were. The creature raised his hand. His perfeclty human shaped. Perfeclty Christopher shaped hand and pointed at Anthony. And then made the "no no no" gesture, waiving one finger from side to side.

He was signaling what the Rim of the coffee cup had told us. Anthony shouldn't have been there. 1+1 is 2. He wanted Christopher and I, and wanted Nothing to do with Anthony. He looked me dead in my eyes, upper lip pulsating, and then looked at Christopher. He averted his gaze quickly, as if he couldn't standing seeing what my Christopher, what the REAL Christopher looked like.

And then, he was gone. He turned around, suitcase still firmly in hand, and walked away. He walked to the left of us, that's all we saw. We never saw where he went. He just vanished into the night. By the time the creature was out of sight the awful smell died down.

The locks of the car flew open, and the three of us threw ourselves out of the vehicle. Anthony couldn't stand, the overwhelming stench was too much for him, but I propped him up and Christopher held the door to the police station. We were inside in a flash, Anthony's dead-weight and all.

A police officer rushed towards us.

"What's going on? Is he ok?" Asked the police officer. He reached to his shoulder mounted radio and spoke into it. "DI 52, DI 52, three males, one injury. Med staff to the Lobby"

Anthony sprang up. The cool, clean air of the inside of the police station drove the life back into him like a hammer to a nail.

“We’re being stalked, we’re being followed, we’re being, we’re being, fuck.” Anthony had reached his point, he had been singled out by the creature, he had been pointed at and it was all too much for him to bare. He just started weeping uncontrollably. Not knowing how to handle any of this.

“Officer, we need to file a police report immediately.” Chris, ever the present lawyer, took control of the situation.

“Ok, I’m Officer Michael Han, I’ll take the report, but your friend needs help.” Right as he finished a male officer wearing gloves and carrying a medical supply kit came around the corner and approached us. He could see Anthony in distress and immediately started to attend to him.

Officer Han: Ok Gentlemen, care to tell me what’s going on?

Me: I’m Dr. Peter Tillman, and this is my husband Christopher Tillman, we’re being stalked and threatened and we need to be protected.

Christopher: The person stalking us has assumed my identity and has been charging things to my credit card, attempted to use (steal wasn’t an appropriate word and Christopher knew it) my vehicle, and even entered my home while my husband was there by himself.

Office Han: Ok, I understand the panic. But who’s your friend and what does he have to do with this?

Christopher: His name is Dr. Anthony Jovid, and he’s my cousin. He’s been helping us out since we realized that we weren’t safe.

Officer Han: and how long has that been?

Christopher and I blankly stared at one another, not knowing how to answer this man’s question. We couldn’t tell him everything because he would think we were crazy, but at the same point, we had to disclose what happened.

Christopher: Since yesterday, around 8pm. That’s when he entered my home, impersonated me, and attempted to harrass my husband.

Officer Han: ok, do you know where this person is now?

Anthony pulled off the oxygen mask that they had placed over his mouth. The on site nurse had proped him up in a chair so that he could be safe if he fainted. “Show him the car!” He screamed. Well it wasn’t a scream since he had no energy with which to do so.

Christopher and I took Officer Han outside the door, waiting to show him the duplicate car that the creature had conned us into getting into. But nothing. The car was gone. I looked across the road and just as expected, I could see my car, my real car, or I thought it was my real car, sitting in the parking lot of the Tim Hortons.

Not wanting to risk it, I told the officer to come with us across the road. He radioed in to tell the control board where he was going, and crossed the road with us. Anthony remained in the police station, after all, the creature apparently didn’t want him.

Officer Han, Christopher and myself approached the vehicle. Not knowing what to expect. The cop took out his flash light and shon it inside the car.

Officer Han: This your vehicle Sir?

Christopher: Yes, it’s registered in both our names

Officer Han: Please open the doors. If you do not mind

Christopher: Not at All, please have a look around.

The police officer thoroughly searched the vehicle, even lifting the bottom part of the trunk and rifiling through the glove compartment. We waived any right we had to unnecessary search and seizure and let the man do his job.

Of course there was nothing. Nothing at all.

Officer Han: Come back with me to the station, and fill out the paper work. We’ll see how your friend’s doing. If he needs to go to the hospital, I’ll ride him over. If not, there’s not really much we can do gentleman.

Christopher: But, you, I, well, how!

Peter: Nothing officer?

Christopher: He's right, there's not much he can do. Thank you Sir, we'll fill out the paper work.

We all got into the car, including Officer Han who we asked to accompany us, and went back to the station in order to fill out the paper work. It took less than 20 minutes, and Anthony had recovered well enough to come with us. We thanked the police and went into the parking lot.

I unlocked the car and looked around to make sure nothing was off. But what the hell could I prove? What did I know any more? nothing. We couldn't tell what was real from what was fake anymore.

We sat in the car, engine running for about 15 minutes and discussed what we should do. The suggestions ranged from a hotel, to Anthony's, to our house to just staying in the parking lot. Regardless of where we went, this creature would find us. At least we had filled out the police report and Officer Han took us serious enough to say he would come by tomorrow and check on us. It was about 1am by the time all of this was finished.

Anthony and I decided to go to my mum's place in Yorkville. It was a penthouse with more than enough room to house us, and frankly it seemed that this thing, this creature, this fake Chris was only after myself and Christopher. So we knew we would be safe there. And it was only a few minutes away.

I called my mum, and she said to come on over. She's a bit of a night owl and I didn't give her any details about why we were in the area or why we wanted to come over. She just said to stop on by. So we went.

On the drive, I asked Christopher for the paperwork that the cop had given us, just so I could make sure it was safe. There was now an official record of what had happened to us, and I wanted to make sure my copy was reachable. Just in case.

I took one glance down at the paper. I wasn't shocked, I wasn't surprised, I wasn't offput. I was just plain terrified. Instead of a detail of the incident in the section meant for that. It only said the same three words over and over and over.

niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow

I'm at my mum's house now. I sit and wait for tomorrow. This is starting to make more sense now. I guess all debts do need to be paid.

Part 4

NOTE1: All of this happened between when we got to my mum's place and right before I uploaded the last update. It was a lot, and I really didn't want to create a post that was too long.

NOTE2: I had a long conversation with my mother. Her recollections are in italics.

Thank you all so much for your support and your kindness during this intensely terrifying time in my life.

Anthony, Christopher and I pulled up to the entrance of my Mother's condominium. It had a beautiful circular driveway, a gate that allowed people and vehicles in and out, and an extremely ornate fountain in the centre of the courtyard. 24 hour valet parking was a nice perk.

Anthony: Are you sure that you want to let some poor unsuspecting Valet drive this car. What if that thing decides he wants to take it for another spin?

Me: Honestly at this point, I doubt that it's after anyone but me and Chris. I mean you were singled out, he pointed right at you.

Anthony: Thanks Pete, I really needed to be reminded of that.

Anthony was still obviously shaken, but also extremely relieved that he was not being hunted. Or Haunted. Whatever the right word may have been.

The valet approached the car; a young woman, about 25 years old in a sharp brass button jacket and matching pants. "Hello Mr. Tillman I hope this night finds you doing well," she said looking at Christopher. I presume you're here to see Mrs. Blochbauer?" I recognized the valet, Elise I think her name is, always very sweet.

"I am, but I don't think we'll be needing you to park the vehicle, we'll drive ourselves." Christopher had made the decision to spare this poor woman from whatever horrors she could potentially be subjected to by driving the car.

What has my life become? Letting a Valet park a car was now a hazard to be avoided because a face-stealing creature might stink her to death? God, I just wanted relief.

We turned the car into the underground parking lot. My mother's condo was the largest ones in the building, and as such it entitled her to six reserved parking spaces. As we descended a serious feeling of unease enveloped all of us. We were going underground? After a night like this?

The smiling faces of the three security guards we saw walking around reassured us, but god knows why. This thing was capable of manifesting unnoticed in a busy restaurant and replicating a full sized car; three security guards would be useless. Hell, the entire Air Force would probably be of no use to us at this point.

We parked, and sat in the car, all of us were a combination of exhaustion and terror, not really knowing what we were supposed to do with ourselves.

Anthony, as always broke the silence that we had opted for. "Do you really want to involve your mother in this?"

Christopher sternly shot back at him "Anthony, you heard what Peter said. It doesn't want anything to do with you. One plus one is two, you're safe, and I'm sure his mum is too."

I agreed with Christopher, and pointed out that we should at least leave the basement. We exited the vehicle and hurried to the elevator. Another closed space. Crap.

Christopher pushed the button, and due to the good services of the Valet, the Elevator arrived very quickly, with her inside of it. Good evening Dr. Tillman, how are you tonight?" She asked in a very comforting tone.

"You wouldn't believe if I told you," was the only thing that came out of my mouth. I don't know why. It just made the elevator ride to the penthouse very awkward.

"Well, I hope your tomorrow is much better than your tonight has been." She was such a sweet girl, and that's really what we all needed in that moment. Unadulterated comfort, since whatever semblance of peace we had in our lives had been completely stripped away.

We rode the rest of the way in complete silence.

The elevator doors opened into the hallway, and Christopher and Anthony left very quickly. Tensions were still running high.

"Take care Dr Tillman," the valet said from inside the elevator. I turned and smiled.

"And Don't worry Sir, I'm sure you'll find your suitcase, it'll be in the garage when you get home." She smiled. The door closed.

My blood ran cold, Christopher and Anthony were too far ahead of me to notice what she had said. The creature knew we were here. There really was no outrunning this thing. I either had to live with it, or kill myself. I was just left standing in the hallway.

Christopher turned and looked at me, "Babe, are you ok? Come on, let's just get inside." I shook myself back to reality, whatever that was, and booked it to the apartment door. There were two penthouse suites on the floor, one on either side of the hall. We rang the doorbell and the comforting Westminster chime sounded.

One of the night maids opened the door. "Good evening Dr. Tillman, your mother is reading on the terrace, I'll let her know you're here."

I wasn't 12 anymore. I knew 'reading on the terrace' was code for smoking a joint. It was quite chilly, there was no way she was reading outside.

We all made our way to the living room and collapsed into individual chairs.

It had been 24 hours since this all started. Well a bit over that, but it was only the night before that the creature had slept next to me, it had only been about 8 hours since we were at Anthony's and had only been 2 hours since my irrationality was confirmed by our encounter with "Chris" in the parking lot.

Being in my mum's condo made me feel safe. Thank god she still had that affect on me.

My mother had smoked pot since the 70s, but it wasn't until I had my own issues with drugs that she divulge that fact to me. Something about making me feel more connected to her and making it easier for her to put me into rehab. Pot, meth, yeah really not the same thing, but whatever made the poor woman feel more connected to me. I hate that version of myself. I don't think of that Peter. That Peter died in rehab.

"Darlings! How are you! Anthony, it's been far too long. Chris how was Vienna?" My mother turned the corner into the living room. Diane Von Furstenberg wrap dress (vintage, of course) flowing in the breeze coming from the open terrace door. She was finishing up the chocolate chip cookie that was her favourite munchie. She wasn't one for coming second in a conversation and dominated any room she was in. Think Dame Edna meets Barbara Walters.

"I'm ok Mum, just exhausted, we've had a pretty intense afternoon." I decided to not sugar coat anything and just be straightforward with her.

"Peter, what's wrong?" My mother's tone had changed. She was now obviously concerned, and wanted every detail of why we were there and where we had come from. She walked over and sat next to Christopher, facing me.

“Mum, something’s following us. I don’t know what, I don’t know how long it’s been around, but yesterday....yesterday it...” This was the third time in less than 24 hours that I found myself telling the story about the creature sleeping next to me, and for some reason it hurt more, it terrified me more, to tell it to my mother. I knew how much she cared about me, and how it had only been “her and I” since Dad passed away, so I knew telling her this would cause her so much pain.

“Yesterday it shared a bed with me.” I just blurted it out. Tonight wasn’t the night for filters.

My mother is a pale woman, but whatever colour she had in her face drained instantly. There was no hiding her emotions, she was terrified. Something had tried to hurt her little boy, and she believed me. Then again, I was always open, even with the drug usage, so she had no reason to believe I was lying.

“What do you mean it shared a bed with you? Did you have sex with it? And what the hell is it? What sort of creature are you referring to?” I think it was the tone, or the straightforward abruptness of her questions that set me on edge. This was the first time I was telling the story and it was being believed, but her reactions seemed so controlled. Her question so clean and methodical.

“No! I did not have sex with it, mother!” I raised my voice in a vainglorious attempt at self-defence, only to realize that I shouldn’t be yelling at my mother. “It’s, well it’s Christopher. Well it’s not really Christopher, obviously, but it looks exactly like him, only it’s thicker, or it was thicker, and it has this god awful lip that looks like its about to explode.”

My mother shot out of her seat and stood stock still; arms akimbo, “Peter Jurge Tillman! You’ve been doing drugs again haven’t you! What is it this time?! Cocaine! LSD! Methamphetamine! Heroine again?!” She rarely yelled at me, but this was almost at the top of her voice. The maid who was within sight made herself scarce.

“Mother! I have not!” I was standing now, my large frame dominating my mother. Two bulls rearing to attack one another.

“Paola he’s telling the truth. I wouldn’t have believed him either, but I saw it with my own eyes.” Christopher, my staunch defender, said as he slowly stood up and put his hand on my mother’s shoulder. “Peter, I’ll tell her the rest.”

“No, I don’t want to hear the rest, that’s enough for one night. You boys need to get some rest and in the morning we’ll discuss this. I’m exhausted and frankly my mind’s not clear enough to talk about monsters and boogeymen right now!” She was defiant and unyielding. I knew from how she was acting that she was in no mood to hear our story, but this was very odd. My mother was never one to doubt me, and was never one to fly into a rage when confronted with a good piece of gossip or news.

“For fuck’s sake mother, we’re being stalked and could be in danger!” I couldn’t hold it in. I rarely swore around her; I’m a grown man and I still don’t curse in front of my mother, but this time it was warranted.

“You’re in one of the safest buildings in the city, nothing can get you here. Boys, please change and make yourselves comfortable. Anthony, I’m sorry but I don’t have anything in your size, but we’ll get you some toiletries and a robe. You can have a nice warm shower. Christopher, Peter, help yourselves.”

She wandered out of the room and directed Anthony to Sylvie, one of the night staff who was too busy pretending that she did not hear my mother reference my drug-addled past, to realize that my mother had walked up behind her.

“Sylvie, this is Anthony, please show him to a room and make him comfortable.” My mother, ever the hostess.

Christopher had left the room to go and change. He had showered when we had returned home from the airport, but that was hours ago, and after all the sweating and insanity that we had gone through, he figured that a nice long shower would do him some good. I refused to let him go and told him to shower with the door open. I refused to let him be out of sight for any reason.

I found myself standing alone in the cavernous living room staring out the wall of windows. The city was beautiful at night, but the only thing on my mind was when the creature would strike next. He had already sent me a message via the Valet. He knew I was here. What would happen. What the hell did he want, and why me?

“Come with me onto the terrace,” my mother said as she walked up behind me. “Jesus! Don’t scare me like that, not after what I’ve gone through!” I sternly said to her. “It’s bad enough that you think I’m crazy.”

“Put your jacket on and come with me onto the terrace. Bring your cigarettes.” She ordered.

My mum had smoked cigarettes until she was pregnant with me, or so she claimed, and hated the fact that I smoked tobacco. “Marijuana’s a beautiful, healthy plant, no carcinogens” was always her retort whenever I threw the fact that she smoked pot in her face.

My mother didn’t wait for me and was already out on the terrace, second (or potentially third) joint lit. She inhaled deeply, “Sit down.” She gestured to the lounger that was three feet away from me.

“I don’t feel like sitting, I’d rather stand,” I lit my cigarette.

My mother had her back to me and was looking out over the city. I had never really seen her like this, not since dad died. She was usually very upbeat and energetic; pot never had a downer effect on my mother, but rather made her mind flow more easily and helped her to have that zest she was known for.

“Which one happens first, the smell, or the sight.” My mother quietly asked, still facing the city.

I coughed. I had smoked for 15 years, I knew how to smoke, but that question caught me off guard completely. I coughed hard, trying to catch my breath.

“WHAT?! WHAT DID YOU SAY?!” I wheezed at her. I was trying to scream, but like Anthony in the police station, the first question just knocked the wind out of me.

Mum: What happens first, do you see him, or do you smell him.

Me: How do you know about the smell?! Has he been here?! Did he hurt you?

Mum: Answer the question Peter, Do you smell him first or do you see him first?

Me: It’s always the smell. I’m not telling you anything else until you tell me what you know.

Mum: is it the lip or the eyes?

Me: What?

Mum: Is it his lip that bulges out or is it his eyes? Which one? I know you said something about his lip, but I want to make sure.

She hadn't turned to face me. At all. I could tell from the sound of her voice that her throat was starting to tighten, as if she was on the verge of tears. I hated seeing my mother cry, but I wanted some damn answers.

Me: It's his lip.

Mum: Did he give you anything? Has he left you any notes or cards?

I took the crumpled police report from my pocket and handed it to her, I pointed out the section where the incident report was supposed to have been:

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Mum: Ok, it's time to pay the debt. All debts must be paid. All dues have to be collected.

My mother turned around, tears were streaming down her face. I slowly walked up to her and she took another drag from the dying joint.

"Peter, we need to talk about your future, about what's going to happen." She tearfully said. I knew that this was my chance to finally get some answers, to finally understand what was happening in my life. But to know that my mother knew something about this and never said anything enraged me.

"How could you not tell me about this? How could you keep something like this a secret?" I asked, both hurt and angry. Actually I was livid, virtually vibrating out of sheer and total rage. Teeth clenched.

"We were told you had more time, they told us that they would only come after we had both died. After you had your son," She put her hand on my shoulder and out of rage I pushed her away.

"Who is they?! What is going on?!" I demanded answers. The rage had vanished and was instantly replaced with a fear of not knowing and a sadness that my mother knew without telling me anything.

"Son, our past is a lie. Your father was never very good at…was never very good at…well he really was never very good at anything. Your grandparents were amazing. Both his parents and my parents knew one another before the war, during the time in the camps. His parents were sent to Buchenwald, and my parents were dumped into Mauthausen. Luckily none of them, his parents nor mine, were sent to Auschwitz or Bergen Belsen, but Buchenwald was no luxury hotel."

"When they left the camps at the end of the war, they ran into one another as they made their ways across a war-ravaged Europe. Your father's mother and my father even started a business together. They were cloth merchants. Not rich by any standards, but it was the 40s. The name of the game wasn't get rich, it was survive. We were poor, our poverty stemmed back generations, but we always made ends meet."

"Eventually our parents, drifted and lost touch with one another. When your father was a teenager he came back to Germany to find work, and there he found me. We fell deeply in love within a matter of weeks, our parents not knowing, and frankly we had no clue that they knew one another. Our courtship become more intense and finally we realized that we had to tell our parents. He wrote back to his father and mother, and I brought him home to meet my parents."

"Within the first five minutes of meeting my parents, and finding out who his parents were, my father had spat at him and told him to never enter our house again."

This was a story that I had never heard and I was still not seeing how this had anything to do with me, or the creature.

"What the hell does this have to do with the damn creature?" I interrupted.

She paid me no mind and continued to talk.

"My father told me to never bring him back to that house, my mother barely said a word. I was shocked, I had no idea why they would behave like this. Later that night I went to my mother and asked what could have made papa react as strongly as he had. My poor mother broke down crying, and told me that while her husband and your father's mother were busy trying to make ends meet, She and your father's

father were busy….well busy staying busy."

I knew this meant that my paternal grandfather and my maternal grandmother had had an affair. I was slightly disappointed, but that entire generation was dead and none of this was explaining what the creature had to do with anything.

"Their spouses finally found out and were livid. My father threatened to leave my mother and never talk to her again, he called her a whore, and asked how, when he had gone hungry many nights in the camps saving scraps for her to eat, that she could throw herself at another man. My mother really had no defenses against this and become extremely depressed after her affair with your paternal grandfather ended."

"Anyway, your father and I refused to be separated. We refused to let our parents hatred for one another get in the way of our love. We loved one another so much Peter, you have to believe me. We were so madly in love and refused to let one another go. We were both kicked out of our homes and told never to return. We were poor. We were beyond poor. Neither him nor I had any schooling, we had no funds to get by on, and it wasn't like the olden days when we could farm. Europe was changing and we needed to make money."

"Your father got a job at a bank that paid him a meager wage. He was a teller, but that was probably because the bank manager thought she would be able to convince your father to fuck her if she kept him employed."

I had never heard my mother speak with so much vulgarity before. I kind of liked that she was letting it go, and at the same point was at my whits end. I didn't need to hear about the family history, I just wanted to know what was happening.

"And then one day it changed. It all changed. Your father came home and told me that he had saved up all of his earnings and had dumped them into the markets. 'We're going to be rich Paola!' He would say. 'We're never going to have to worry again.' He was 22 at this point."

"And he was right, we became rich. And not regular Rich, VERY rich. We became ultra wealthy. Millions and millions and millions of dollars within a few years. I would ask from time to time how the markets were doing and he would always tell me, 'Don't worry Paola, I would never let anything happen to us, our family is going to be secure! Our children will be happy!' by the time your father was 30 he was worth more than our entire town put together. He was loved all through Germany and was a celebrated financier. People would spend days travelling and wait hours just to see him, just to get a tip. And it always paid off. I never questioned it because I was too busy spending.'

The joint had gone out and my mother had sat herself down in the chair she originally told me to sit in.

"Then one day we were at the park. Everyone knew who we were and everything was going so well. You were still in my tummy and I was about 4 months along. I just needed some air. And then the smell. Oh Peter the smell. It was like someone had taken my face and shoved it into a dead, rotting, carcass of a pig. I threw up instantly. Your father was white as a sheet. I turned and looked at him after gathering myself."

"We need to leave Paola, we need to leave now! Was all he said, he grabbed my arm and pulled me away. But standing no more than 10 feet in front of us was…your father. I almost fainted. If it wasn't for you giving me strength I would have. Your real father tried to turn us away, but when we turned around the creature, "your father," was standing behind us. It was impossible. Nothing moves like that. The creature started to move towards us. As he got closer, I saw that he was carrying a suitcase. And the smell became stronger and stronger. No one else in the park seemed to notice this, only us. It was a packed park and there was my husband standing in front of my husband and nothing seemed strange to anyone."

"This thing walked up to us, his eyes were almost bulging out of it's head, and the stench, oh god Peter the stench. We were both frozen in terror, your father's grip on my hand almost vice-like as the…as the Creature approached me. He extended his hand, everything about it looked normal except for his eyes. He extended his hand and placed it on my stomach, and rubbed it."

I was on the verge of passing out, what kind of deal did my parents make. What was going on, What the hell was all of this.

My mother continued.

"The creature spoke, it spoke just like your father, nothing was off, its voice was a perfect copy. 'When it is time, we will come. Your husband owes us, and we always collect our dues.' I passed out. I fainted straight to the ground. By the time I came to, about 10 people from the park had come to surround me and your father was leaning over me. I pulled myself up and we pretended that nothing had happened. The crowd dispersed and we went back to the bench we were sitting on. The Smell was gone. I screamed at your father when I knew I could. I asked him what was going on, what the hell that thing was and why was he rubbing my stomach."

"I was a fool! I was an arrogant, greedy fool, and now it's time to pay. Paola, the money, the houses, the cars, the…the…everything was based on a promise! Years ago while working at the bank I went out for a cigarette behind the building. I noticed a man standing there, he smelled awful and had a suitcase with him. Everyone in Europe was still poor and starving, and I felt sorry for him, I felt like I could help. No one should smell like that. I approached him and offered him something to eat. The man smiled back at me and said he was ok. I even offered him to come home and visit us, he was a straggler, he needed some help. I remember what my father told me about his life, sometimes we all need help! Oh Paola forgive me your father cried."

“Your father finished by telling me that the man put his hand on your father's shoulder and said he, your father, could have everythinghe dreamed of, because your father showed him kindness. The man promised your father that everything would be ok, that your father and I would make money, that anything your father touched would turn to gold. Your father thought the man was just crazy and was trying to be nice to him because he offered help. The next day your father’s stocks jumped. He didn’t have much but he saw he could buy a few more shares and hope for the best. And then they jumped again, and again and again. He go the taste of money and he liked it.”

“After the first few millions and everything him touching turning to gold, your father left the bank and started his own company. The day he moved into his new office in Hamburg his newly hired secretary told him an ‘old friend was here to see him.’ Your father had plenty of ‘old friends,’ hangers on, would-be millionaires, down on their luck businessmen, all wanting a piece of the pie. Your father told her to let him in, but the secretary said that the man wanted to meet your father outside."

"Your father sat there, and then the smell hit him. The stench coming off that man with the suitcase all those years ago, you don’t forget a smell like that. Your father hurried down the stairs to meet the man that had blessed him. How could someone who had told my father he would see luck be anything but wonderful? How could he be bad? Your father ran down into the streets, and there standing across the road was the man with the suitcase”

“Your father ran across the street, traffic be damned and followed the man who had started to move! ‘Sir, Friend, slow down! I want to thank you! Your kind words gave me everything! The man turned down another street and your father followed. Suddenly the man stopped and turned. He had the most awful bulging lip your father had seen. Much different from the last time he had seen him, but the awful smell was just the same. Thick and pungent.”

"‘Wilhelm, you’ve done so well for yourself, I’m happy you liked my gift', the man said. Your father was confused, he didn’t receive a gift from the man, only his good blessings. ‘What gift do you mean?’ asked your father. ‘Everything,” said the man, ‘We’ve given you everything, but if you’d like more, we can make that happen.’ Your father was a skeptical man, and never took anything for granted. When he told me this story he also relayed how this man could stare straight into his soul, he knew what your father wanted Peter, and that was money.”

“Wilhelm, we gave you the world, and we can give you more, all we ask is your equal payment. Millions, even billions of dollars, everything you’ve desired.’ The mans voice was calm and like a father. Your father wanted everything Peter, he wanted more than he could spend. Greed got the better of him."

"‘Another blessing my friend? Absolutely! I will take whatever you can give me." The man with the suitcase put his hand on your father’s shoulder and told him that when the time was right, everything would come to him, and everything would be equal. All would be equal. All debts must be paid, all dues must be collected. Your father didn’t agree nor disagree, but the man with the suitcase knew your father couldn’t resist. I just sat in that park bench, pregnant with you, holding my stomach, realizing what your father had done. I SWEAR Peter, I knew nothing until that point."

“And the years went by and the money got bigger. We never made billions, we were close in the 80s, but never hit it. For years after that we would have cryptically written clues show up around us: words inside books would rearrange themselves, random people would ask us if we had found our suitcase, messages on sales receipts, even once on the inside of your backpack when you were a toddler. It stopped for a while, but I knew this day would come. The notes told us that they would only come after we died. After you had a chance at a life."

"And then your father died. We had never seen the man again, but we were never allowed to forget him. The day of your father’s funeral I went to the bathroom in the funeral home to tidy myself up. I was alone until the smell. Oh god the smell. It came wafting through the vent. I thought for sure this was going to be where I died too, and frankly I wished it was. I tried to leave but the handle on the door wouldn’t move. I turned around, and as if out of thin air, he was standing there. Your father, with the bulging eyes. I had stared at Wilhelm’s cold body in that coffin all morning, and now there he was standing there. Until I saw the eyes Peter, I knew when I saw the eyes that the creature had come back.”

“'Don’t be afraid, I’m not here for you’ he said in your father’s voice. 'We only collect what we’re owed. Wilhelm had a heart attack so the burden falls on you. You know what we want and we’ll come and get it when the time was right.' I averted my eyes for a second, and he was gone. The door to the bathroom opened and I ran into the hall. I looked out the door and I could see him, the creature with the bulging eyes walking through the parking lot."

“Peter, they’ve come for their dues, and they expect payment.”*

My mother walked off the balcony and I sat there. I didn’t have questions, I was just in shock. I was told we were old money, that it was inherited from grandparents who died long before I was born. I had to confront the creature, and was going to, or live in terror forever.

She came back very quickly, crying softly, and just handed me a card. It was the business card from my father’s first company. When he “shook hands’ with the creature (so to speak) and mortgaged my life for his undeserved wealth.

Part 5

NOTE 1: The next updated (the one after this one) will be the last part

NOTE 2 Thank you all.

I don't know how long I sat on the terrace. The morning was very brisk, especially for a July, but this was Toronto, and Canada has had some awful summers lately. I think I focused on the wind because it distracted me from the vacuum that my life had been thrown into. A gaping, sucking void from which there was evidently no escaping.

The creature was able to manifest in Germany, in Canada, in England, everywhere. My parents and I travelled extensively when I was younger, and where ever we had gone apparently the ghastly writing would follow. The notes never ended, mum and dad were never allowed to forget that their child had been bargained for a success that had happened overnight.

I finally stood. Actually that's a lie. I didn't have the ability to stand, I lurched myself out of the chair and proped myself up against the column that abutted the chair I sat in. I had smoked through almost an entire pack of cigarettes, and one of the night mades was nice enough to bring me two bottles of wine. I had lost all concept of time, it must have been about 430 in the morning at this point. I could see the occasional bird flying around, I knew dawn would soon wash away this godawful night. But then what?

I had all the money I could possibly ever need, and Christopher and I could just run away somwhere, but anywhere we went that thing would follow. And I didn't do anything to deserve it.

I had kicked the drug habit, I had reformed myself. Hell, I even made sure that in all of my wild years of sex and partying that I never contracted anything; safe sex. Always. But what was it all for? I should have just wasted away my life in some run down shit hole outside of Bern, or London, or Venice. I should have partied away my life and enjoyed what I had been sold for, before this reaper came to claim his prize. All debts must be paid, all dues must be collected.

I finally entered the condo and made my way to the east dining room and collapsed into one of the chairs. I was an angry man. An angry, bitter man. An angry, bitter, drunk man. Who had to teach a class in a matter of hours. That definitely wasn't going to happen. How the fuck was I going to go to school again? To go about my life? To do anything?

Christopher and I had planned so many good years to come. Children, a vacation home, retiring, endless travel. How could I do any of that now? How could I do this to Christopher? Children were certainly out of the picture, and there was no way I could have Christopher constantly looking over his shoulder for the day that his double would finally just come and...take me.

God, to know that I was claimed.

The staff turned over at 5am, and I saw two of the maids changing out of their uniforms and into their regular clothes. I knew that I had to start tackling this, but how the hell would I go about even starting? How would I deal with this.

I reached for my phone. The class was at 830 and if I sent out a broadcast message to my students, I would save a good number of them the annoyance of coming to an 830 class, only to find that their professor wasn't there.

2% battery life. That's all I had left in my phone. I had to find a charger. I hit the page button, and luckily Sylvie hadn't clocked out yet. I asked her, my breath smelling of Chateauneuf de Pape (a good vintage at least), and my words slurred, if she could source me a charger for my iPhone. She could see that I was in distress and had no doubt overheard the conversation between my mother, Anthony, Christopher and I earlier on that night (morning?).

She disappeared momentarily and came back, charger in hand. God I loved her, she was such a useful person. Like I had been, before any utility in my life had been so unceremoniously stripped away.

"Here you are Dr. Tillman. You should check your phone, he doesn't like to be kept waiting." She dropped the charger on the table, and left the room. I was drunker than I realized, but I understood what she said. Within a few seconds of her leaving the room, the famous tritone that all iphone users are familiar with sounded.

It was an area code 647 number.

ittsS Kolde enN dahH TerIce.

I sobered up instantly. This was it. He was here. He was outside, and he knew that I knew what he wanted.

I stood up and turned towards the hallways leading to the terrace. I hesitantly made my way down to the wall of windows that opened up to

one of the absolute best views the city had to offer.

Money, it buys so many things, and nothing at all.

I made my way to the door and turned the handle. If I wasn't sober before, the smell that came rushing into my nostrils certainly fixed that problem. I could smell him near. The same burning at the back of the throat, the same apprehensive feeling, the same taste of rotten flesh filling my mouth. Except this time I understood him. I understood that he wanted me.

The terrace wraps around the corner of the building at which point it stops and the terrace of the adjoining apartment begins. My mum's took over 3/4 of the floor space and Mrs. Thompson-Fitch, wife of the advertising magnate (4th wife to be exact) owned the remaining 1/4.

I turned the corner, away from the view of the living room. The sun was slowly rising, and it was blue out. You know that time of morning where the sun begins to creep above the horizon, it wasn't quite dawn, but it wasn't quite night.

I could see the creature standing at the far end of the terrace, back towards me. I froze. I was filled with the bravado of a wronged man leading up to the turn, but now was consumed with dread. Was this it? Was my life going to be claimed now? Was the debt to be collected? I stopped moving forward.

And then in the Christopher's voice, in the voice of the man that I loved so much, the voice of the man who I would give everything for, the creature spoke.

"Hello Peter."

I couldn't respond. I just stood there and waited to die.

"Hello Peter."

Again, no response from me. I couldn't bring myself to do it, I couldn't bring myself to talk or even to feel at this point. Every atom in my existence was vibrating with fear. No excuses.

"Hello Peter. I would appreciate a response." The creature seemed to be getting impatient. 'Chris' wanted to talk.

"Hel" was the only thing I could manage to get out. I was so exhausted, so weak, so drained, so...well so everything. All emotions that I had ever experienced in the negative sat on me like some kind of massive stone, waiting to crush me. Nothing happy, nothing contentful, nothing peaceable. Just the dead weight of a ruined life.

The smell still lingered in the air, thick and acrid. Like that smell of burnt hair.

"Paola spoke with you, she told you the deal" The creature continued, back still towards me, no sign of movement on his part. I still couldn't speak. Facing the back of him was like facing the back of every failed moment in my life, mixed with a terror so visceral and real you could cut it with a knife.

"She told you half the story. You should ask Christopher the other half." He said, still sounding exactly like Christopher. Like he was referring to himself in the third person. And then he turned around.

I could see the lip from 50 feet away. It had burst at this point, and oozed a thick black substance that ran down the front of his coat. It looked a mixture of tar and water. Black enough to be tar, but flowed like water. Like dead, necrotized blood.

I backed up, but there really wasn't much of place to back up. This sight terrified and burned me. It was like watching Christopher in pain, but knowing that it wasn't Christopher somehow didn't seem to help.

He advanced forward.

I was backed against the wall. I had no where to go, and as if controlled by another, my legs failed me. I couldn't bring myself to run left or right. The creature continued to advance forward. I noticed how much his walk was like Christopher's, with that stupid sort of dip that Christopher does when he walk's slow; a result of too many high jumps off of cliffs into water when he was a teenager.

I shut my eyes. Like a child attempting to get away from a terrible sight, the smell of the creature getting stronger and stronger with each advancing step. I could feel hot, fresh tears streaming down my face. I was crying, not out of fear but out of hoplessness. I had so many things that I wanted to do, I had so many wishes that I tried so hard to fullfill. All that was gone, and the only thing left was a blank IOU, waiting to be signed by whatever this creature walking towards me was.

He stopped within arms reach and raised his right hand to my face. The smell was almost unbearable. It was unbearable. I could feel myself dry heaving. I had smelled this stench several times in the past 24 hours, and this time the proximity brought me even closer to vomiting. I

still hadn't opened my eyes, hoping beyond hope that somehow this would magic the creature out of existence, and I would wake up, next to my Christopher, heaving and panting after some kind of acrobatic lovemaking session.

The creature placed his hand on my cheek. It was warm and exactly like Christopher's touch. That touch that had lifted me off the floor of the kitchen at the houseparty where first met. That touch that had held my hand when I stood in front of my parents and confirmed that we were getting married. That touch that had held me close the moments before my doctoral thesis defence. That touch which had held my face on the beach in the Seychelles and pulled me to his after saying "I do."

It was that last thought that made me open my eyes.

The fact that I knew what I had, and I knew what I could lose in an instant if I didn't cooperate. It was the single most terrifying thing that I had experienced so far. To be that close the one that wanted to claim me. I fainted, and hit my head on the concrete tile. hard.

"Oh my god! Peter, Darling, my Son! Please wake up!" I could see three blurry figures leaning over me, and could feel that I was still obviously outside. My head was pounding and it took a few seconds for my vision to settle. It was Christopher, Anthony, and my Mother.

I shot up. Standing straight upright. It was bright and hot outside, like a regular July day. How long had I been passed out for?

I backed away from them, no longer knowing what was real, and what had been the creatures doing. I hadn't forgot a thing. I turned and looked at Christopher.

"WHICH ONE ARE YOU? ARE YOU REAL? DO YOU WANT ME? WHAT DID YOU WANT ME TO DO? HOW AM I PAYING FOR THIS? WHY DID, HOW. FUCK YOU!" I collapsed onto the ground crying like a child. My mother came near me, and I started to scream. Scream like a parent whose just been told that their child had died, scream like a husband who made it out of the house only to watch his wife die in the ensuing fire, screamed like a man who had nothing left to live for.

"YOU DID THIS, THIS WAS YOUR FUCKING FAULT, AND HIS. FUCK YOU ALL, I NEVER DID THIS. YOU SOLD ME. YOU LIED TO ME!! DAD FUCKING SOLD ME." I stood up again, but once more, like being drunk on the terrace, I braced myself against the wall. I was still crying, almost uncontrollably. Anthony came towards me, and I leaned all my weight on him. The poor man, I was almost a foot taller, but he bore my full frame; soldier carrying comrade through the jungles of Vietnam. No man left behind.

He put me into a chair, and just hugged me. I was hyperventilating, and he straddled my legs, and pressed his face into mine

"Look at me Peter. LOOK AT ME! Just count now. 1-2-3-4. 1-2-3-4. 1-2-3-4. Just breathe" Anthony was a small man, but I could see in that moment why he was a good physician. He took control of me in a way reserved for lovers and those I apparently owed debts to.

It took about three minutes but Anthony finally moved off of me and I regained composure. My mind was still racing, but my body was finally under control. The hyperventilating had stopped, I was starting to regain composure, as best as I could. I looked down at my watch and it read 7am. Good, early.

"I have two surgeries today, are you going to be ok to be here without me?" Anthony, my saviour in that moment, asked while still within arm's reach.

"Yeah, I think I'll be fine, can you come back when you're done?" I asked him.

"Sure, no problem, my last one is at 3pm, I should be able to walk back over in 10 minutes. I'll call from the hospital when I get there and when I'm leaving, just in case I don't show up here." Anthony's composure was very reassuring.

Anthony continued, "I love you man, don't worry, we'll sort this out." I smiled as he turned and walked off the terrace, one of the day maids walking behind him.

"You need to cancel your class." Christopher said with authority.

"You need to explain to me what you know." I shot back at him. He was right, I did need to cancel my class, but I wanted answers more than anything. The creature had told me that Christopher knew more than he was letting on, and I wanted to get to the bottom of this.

"What do you mean?" Christopher asked, with an obvious look of concern painted across his face.

"You know what I mean Christopher. After you fell asleep last night, mum told me everything." I continued in an almost cartoonish fashion to recite the events that transpired after Christopher went into the shower. From my mother telling me the truth, to meeting the Creature, to being advised that the love of my life had not told me what he knew. Almost all in one breath. I felt like was going to start hyperventilating again, but gathered myself knowing that Anthony wasn't there to be my knight in shining armour.

“Peter,I don’t know what you’re talking about. What you mean you met the Creature? Did he look like me? What did he say to you about me?” Christopher gave himself away.

My eyes narrowed, I was on the verge of physically attacking him, “What do you mean, 'what did he say to you about me?!' Christopher, so fucking help me god, tell me what you know. I deserve the truth!” I was screaming again, I was having a full blown mental breakdown. My family was bargaining me like a pawn, and no one had the balls to tell me the truth.

I had spent my life searching for the truth. Physics tries to understand the mechanics of this world, and to make sense of the anomalies that arise. Gamma Ray bursts, lenticular clouds, holes appearing in the ground in Russia. Our job was to take the mystical and bring it into the world of the real. To bring the impossible into the possible. This was impossible. Nothing I knew was real anymore.

“Dr. Meagan wasn’t real.” Chris said bluntly.

“What?” I asked in a confused fashion. The name had rang a bell, but I wasn’t connecting the dots.

Christopher finally opened up and told me the truth.

“Peter, I never went to sleep last night, your mother left you on the terrace and came inside crying. I met her in the library, drinking by herself and started talking to her. She told me everything. The one thing we couldn’t figure out was why the creature looked like me. The fact that it resembled your father made sense, he had made the deal, but the fact that this iteration looked like me threw us both. We couldn’t come up with a reason, until I thought about your drug usage”

“I am NOT to blame for this, I fucked up my youth and had to work long and hard through rehab to get the fuck out of that situation! You have NO idea what I went through!” I shot back. That was my biggest personal triumph, I have nothing left in my life, and I felt like Christopher was robbing me of that as well.

Fuck defending my doctoral thesis, and being offered tenure, dragging myself up by my bootstraps, fixing my addiction problems was my greatest triumph.

“You died Peter.” Christopher bluntly said

I didn’t know what to make of that statement, I had no clue what he was talking about.

“What the hell do you mean? I mean, sure there were blackout periods, but I never fucking flatlined.” I scathingly threw back at him.

“You’re the love of my life. You’re the reason that I get up in the morning. There are weeks when I work 70 hours, but to know that I’ll come home to your perfect body (my body was far from perfect), and your beautiful face, and your gorgeous smell (I did smell pretty awesome). Just thinking about you makes me know that I found the one that gave me the reason to continue living. The one that drives me to succeed, and the one that I want to hold my hand as I close my eyes for the last time, and leave this world. That’s what you mean to me.”

Christopher was crying at this point.

“We found one another when you were at your worst. You were a strung out tweaker (drug slang for one who does a tonne of meth and then parties for days) that I helped up off the floor of the kitchen at a house party: you told me that I had the most beautiful eyes that you had ever seen. You made me realize that I was worth something. Peter when you met me I was so confused, I hated myself for liking men, and my parents' hate equaled mine. I had no drive to continue, but even in your drug-addled state, you knew how to make me feel like I was worth it. I fell in love with you, the only time I had truly been in love. When you were sober, you were the best, and when you were high, you fucked like a god and I loved it, but I lost you in those moments of all consuming drug binges”

I was crying at this point. I loved Christopher, and this reminded me why.

“There was one particularly terrible night. We had spent the afternoon together and had lunch at Barberien, and spent the afternoon walking along the harbourfront, it was a beautiful day. You left me and told me that you were going to meet David, your dealer, and my heart sank. When I had you, I had you, but when I let you go, you let yourself go.”

I just stared at Christopher, my mother was weeping, and covering her mouth. Evidently Christopher had told her this story earlier on that morning.

Christopher continued.

“About 10pm that night, I tried calling you and you weren’t answering. I got a terrible feeling, even at your worst you always answered me. Even if the only thing I could hear was the pounding base of whatever god awful club you decided to tweak the night away in. But that night, I got no answer. I tried several times, and around 11pm I finally gave up and called your parent's house. One of the night staff

answered and advised me that you had been rushed to the hospital. You were at St. Michael's."

I recalled bits and pieces of the night he was referring to, but only truly remembered regaining consciousness in the hospital bed, feeling perfectly fine. I remembered my mother mentioning how much she loved Dr. Meagan for bringing me back, but that was it.

"I raced down the Gardiner Expressway, going over 150km per hour. I didn't know what I was doing. I had had a couple of drinks with my friends, and was pretty tipsy, it's pretty amazing that I didn't crash on the way there. I sped into the parking lot and ditched my father's Bentley in the entryway and just ran into the hospital. I found the Emergency room, and at first they refused to let me see you. Thats when I saw your mother. She was sitting in a chair, babbling to herself, talking about how you shouldn't climb so high on the monkey bars because you would fall and scrape your knee."

"In hindsight I realize that the hospital stank, it reeked exactly like the King Edward Hotel, exactly like the inside of our BMW in the parking lot. It wasn't until I was speaking with your mother last night that I remembered that. I guess in the moment I had blocked it out. I always hated hospitals, and I knew I had to get to you."

I looked at my mother, she looked away.

"I ran up to your mother, and crouched down so we were face to face. I asked her what was wrong, and she just kept saying 'Wilhelm, keep an eye on him, if he falls, he could scrape his knee!' She was completely incoherent, and I expected the worst. I ran into the tirage room where a terribly fat woman was complaining about hemorrhoids. The nurse yelled at me to leave, and I backed out of the room. An attending physician, Dr. Patel, finally found me in the hallway and led me away, firm hand on my shoulder."

One of the day maids had brought up a tray of juices and a tumbler of gin (it was a family tradition, if we were going to drink at 8am, family rules dictated that it be gin). My mother had poured herself a rather large drink, and invited the poor maid to have one too. She rebuffed mum, but finally gave in.

Christopher, gin in hand, continued telling the story.

"Dr. Patel walked me to where your mother was sitting. By this point your mother had been moved into a seperate waiting room. She kept staring at the empty chair next to her and saying 'He's going to be a physicist you know, guaranteed to win a nobel prize!' She didn't even realize that myself nor the doctor had entered the room. I was directed to a chair and that's when my world ended."

"He looked at me and said, 'Peter died from an overdoes at approximately 10pm tonight.' My world collapsed Peter. I understood why your mother, now showing the imaginary person sitting in the seat next to her the baby pictures she carried around in her wallet, was acting the way she was. It was like someone had reached into me and ripped my stomach out through my mouth. I broke down and started to cry. The time was almost 11pm at this point. You had been dead for almost an hour."

I didn't know what to say, what to do, or how to continue. I had died for an hour? Medically speaking, this was impossible. Where was Anthony when I needed him?! Oh right, relieving intracranial pressure in a four year old. It's impossible to recover from an hour of death. But the rest of Christopher's story made me understand better what was going on. He continued speaking,even though his voice was breaking down.

" Dr. Patel left the room. I had never felt more alone. He promised that he would return shortly after doing his rounds, and that I should contact a loved one to pick me up from the hospital. That's when Dr. Meagan entered the room."

"She was a Filipino woman, about 5'6 with short black hair. She put her arm around me and apologized for what I was going through. In hindsight, I now realize that she looked slightly strange, like if her lip was slightly bigger, but nothing I cared about in that moment. The smell was also probably there, however in that moment the entire Santa Clause parade could have marched past me and I wouldn't have noticed. She put her hand on my leg and said, 'we can bring him back.'"

"I was floored, I didn't know that you could bring someone back from over an hour of death. Of course I said, of course I want to! Please! She removed her hand from my leg and looked me in her eyes, there was a strange coldness to the whole thing, but I didn't care, I just wanted you back."

" 'It'll be difficult, but I think we can do it.' Dr. Meagan told me. I didn't care, I couldn't watch your mother go through this, I couldn't go through this. I wanted you back. Do what you need to do, I told Dr. Meagan."

" 'Ok, but remmeber, all debts need to be paid, and all dues are collected.' Dr Meagan said, without breaking eye contact. I just figured that this was some bullshit 'Take care of yourself' thing that Physicians said to the relatives of drug addicts so that we could scold you when they woke you. She left the room again, and came back about 20 minutes later."

I did not recall any of this, I do not recall anything. I was floored. Who was this miracle physician that had brought me back from the other side of the death?

“ ‘You can come see him now, but you must bring his mother.’ She held the door open and pointed us in the direction of your room."

"I found it strange when I entered that you were almost…almost…normal. Like nothing had happened to you. You were sitting up in bed just staring at the wall, waiting for us to walk in. I walked in and gave you the biggest kiss I had ever given you. Your mother snapped back to reality and threw her arms around you, ‘Oh mein Liebling Sohn! Ich werde dich nie gehen lassen (oh my darling son, I’ll never let you go)’ she exclaimed. Within five minutes Dr. Patel had returned to your room, reviewed your chart and gave us a smile. "Ah, another debt," was all he said and left the room, we didn't care what he had to say, we had you back. Dr. Meagan was a miracle worker. And that was it.”

“ You entered rehab within 2 days of being discharged from the hospital and never once went back to the drug. It was a miracle, you were virtually cured. About three months later I returned to the hospital with a large bouquet of roses for Dr. Meagan, this woman had brought you back from the brink of death. I went to the administration office and asked for her. The hospital had never employed a Dr. Meagan, and the only female physician named Meagan who worked there in the past year was a rather rotund Chinese woman who looked nothing like the doctor that saved you that night.I never told anyone this. I figured that an angel had brought you back to us. Now I realized that it was something far different."

I interjected at this point, "If the doctor was chirping on about debts, how the hell did none of this ring a bell to you before, Mother? You must have known what was going on!" I was glaring at my mother, red hot from the hatred that was starting to build for my family, but also from the hatred I had for myself for putting myself in that situation.

My mother helplessly looked at me and said, "Peter, we had lived with this thing since before you were born, there is no questioning it's intentions, and I promised your father years before that I would never say a word about the debt to anyone. What was I supposed to do? Tell Christopher, who I barely knew at that point, "oh my son is claimed by a magical man that follows us around the world?!"

This was the first time my mother had gotten angry at me after telling me the truth. I deserved it.

Christopher contined.

“You were meant to die, you had selfishly wasted your life, but the creature intervened. Your father’s debt was not meant to be collected until after both your parents died, but you beat them to the punch. You died before your mother, and the creature refused to accept this, I imagine, so by brining you back, you yourself mortgaged your own life Peter, not me. Dr. Meagan could have let you die, the creature could have let you die, but you were offered redemption through me, and I knew you wanted it. I wanted you. ”

“I’m sorry Peter, but you actually mortgaged your life,I was only the poor fucker that had to beg for it on your behalf. I had to be the greedy one in that moment, I had to beg for a life that had been so selfishly thrown away!”

Suddenly the entire terace filled with the same smell and all of us turned to the right. The creature was at the far end, appearing out of nowhere.

He looked over at us, put the suitcase down, and opened it.

Part 6

NOTE 1 Thank you all so much for your support and caring through all of this. It's been of immeasurable help.

NOTE 2 Thank you to the kind stranger who gave my last post gold, and brought more attention to my plight.

NOTE 3 Never forget what I went through. Never.

The most blinding, ethereal light I had experienced in my life emitted from the inside of the suitcase. I don't know what else I expected. A dead body, a massive amount of blood, my father's corpse. I don't know what, but the light shone brighter than anything I had ever experienced.

I was knocked off of my feet, flat on my ass, but luckily this time I was able to avoid my head making friends with the cement tiles, and maintained consciousness. My eyes adjusted. I looked around, I was still on the terrace, but my mother and my Christopher were not. I scrambled to my feet, my palms were bruised from bracing myself from the fall, and I wiped the flecks of blood, that started to pool on the heel of my hand, on my pants.

I looked over to where the creature was standing and he was still there. He was still shaped like Christopher, and his lip was still burst. He raised his hand and made the "come here" gesture with his finger. Beckoning me.

I ran in the opposite direction, around the corner and back through the door into the condominium.

"CHRISTOPHER! MUM! WHERE ARE YOU?!" I was frantic. Had this been the payment that the creature was seeking? Was he going to take everything that I loved in the world just for money? My mother's laugh and Christopher's smile was worth more than any amount of money could buy; if they were gone, I could see no reason to live, no reason to continue. A swan dive off of the terrace onto the hot albeit comforting sidewalk 40+ stories below, would have been the choice I would have opted for.

Why the fuck did one woman need so much space. That was the only thought that echoed in my mind as I ran through hallway upon hallway screaming for both of them. I ran into my mother's room, and up the stairs behind her bed to the second floor area, that had it's own balcony. Maybe I had passed out and she had run to where it was considered to be safe.

We had done drills when she first moved in of where she would go if someone broke in and tried to kill her or hold her ransom, and the second floor balcony in her bedroom was always considered the furthest from the main entrance. But nothing, she wasn't there. I couldn't find her anywhere.

Christopher and I had stayed at the condo while our bedroom was being refinished, so he was intimately acquainted with the place. I ran from bedroom to bedroom screaming like a mad man, almost begging him to emerge. But nothing.

I started to run out of breath, snot and flem pouring from my nose and mouth respectively. Fuck why did I smoke so much.

"CHRISTOPHER!!!!!!!!" With the last ounce of strength that I had I screamed. I bellowed. I begged. But nothing, just sheer unadulterated silence.

I refused to give up. I ran out the main entrance and down the hallway. I pounded on Mrs. Thompson-Fitch's door, screaming for her. Maybe in a mad dash, Christopher and my mother had run there.

Nothing, no answer, no response. The old bitch was a terrible person, dripping with jewels and attitude, but I begged and prayed that she would answer her door. I kept pounding, but I never got the response I was so desperately seeking.

My mind raced to alternatives. The Fire Alarm! If I couldn't find my family, I would throw the whole fucking building in a panic! I raced to where the elevator was and pulled the alarm. Dead silence. $15,000 a month in condo fees and the fucking alarm wasn't working! This was bullshit. I hit the elevator button but it refused to light up. I was running out of options, and fast.

I decided that even though my smoker's lungs had failed me while I was running through the apartment, my best bet was to run down the stairs and have one of the valets call the cops. I had tried my hardest to avoid involving the police, since evidently my own family was the source of this newfound misery. I bolted for the stairwell door and grabbed the handle.

Touching the handle seared my hand. Badly. "FUCK!" I screamed and looked at my palm, the scrapes from bracing myself from the fall on the terrace were virtually cauterized. No more bleeding, but my hand was badly burned.

I took my shirt off and wrapped it around my other hand, hoping that this would allow me to turn the knob. I reached for the handle again, less hot but still burning. It refused to turn. The creature was refusing to let me leave. I sat on the ground, I didn't know what other options I

had, I had to face him.

I picked myself up after a minute or two and headed back into my mother's place. As I entered the condo, I realized that not only were Christopher and my mother missing, but so was everyone else. None of the staff were there, no one was.

"Sylvie! Astrid!" I screamed, but no one answered. I realized that I was truly alone. No one was there. I walked back through the maze of corridors and came up to the wall of windows. I walked outside, to the edge of the terrace. I thought about jumping and wanted to ensure that if I did throw myself off, I wouldn't land on someone's balcony. I refused to live in a world without Christopher or my mother. As much of a momma's boy that that made me sound like, losing the two people that I loved the most in the world was too much to handle.

I placed my hands on the railing and leaned over. The building was a highrise in Toronto and I should have seen thousands of cars and people going about their regular lives, unaware of the insane happenings transpiring above them. But there was nothing.

If MY eyes could bulge out of my head they certainly would at that point. There were no other people. No one. I looked into the glass facades of the buildings that surrounded me, and there was no one. There were living rooms with empty sofas, beds that were unmade with no one occupying them, and parking lots that were completely empty. There was no one. What kind of limitless power did this thing have? Could I even kill myself? I had no one left in the world that cared about me. There was nothing but the desolation of an empty soul to confront. I refused to go on. It had been less than two days and my life had been ripped away from me. If you live in a warzone, you cling to your home, your pictures, your loved ones, your affectations. You cling to a cause. I had no causes left.

I propped myself up onto the ledge and sat on the balustrade that ran the entire length of the terrace; my feet dangled over. I kicked off one of shoes to make sure that it would fall, and it tumbled effortlessly to the ground. I had lost my mind and had no way of regaining it. If this thing could strip away everything I loved just by opening a suitcase, what was worth fighting for?

"You may want to take a look inside the suitcase before you decide to do that."

It was Christopher's voice. I knew it was the creature, but hearing that voice made me turn around. I hoped beyond all possibility and all reality that when I turned around my man would be standing there. I slowly turned my head, and there he was, 20 feet behind me. The creature, covered in the black, oozing blood.

I stared at him over my shoulder, my feet still hanging off the terrace.

"What do you want?" I said in a tone just above a whisper, there was no strength left to scream.

The creature advanced towards me and said in that beautiful voice: *"We want to settle your debts. We brought you back before, and if you think that this can be evened out by simply jumping, you're far less intelligent than the degrees we allowed you to have would insinuate."*

I chuckled almost silently. 'Allowed me to have.' He was right. Everything I had earned and everything that I had accomplished, and even everything I had failed at was simply at the behest of this creature and his kind.

Me: What are you? How can you do this? Are you a devil?

The creature quietly chuckled and advanced even closer to me. I wasn't filled with dread anymore, just an overwhelming sense of resignation.

The Creature spoke.

"We are what you humans refer to as fate. We are the hand that guides. We are the power that makes it be. Your world and our's overlap one another, like water on a pane of glass. You see right through us, and when the time is right, just when the time is right, we even out the score."

"We are charged by the universe with the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that an equality is struck. That no one, man, woman, beast, is endowed with the ability to achieve more than they are capable of. When you a see father rip off a door to save his child from a burning vehicle, we have allowed that to occur. And in the same vein, when an infant dies from cancer, we are the ones that take that life. When you walk across that stage, holding that Nobel Prize, we are the ones that have allowed your research to succeed. And in the same vein, when a nuclear missile strikes a city and wipes thousands off the face of the Earth in a blink of an eye, we are the force that allows the trigger to activate."

I had so many questions. I swung around and sat facing the condo, feet now hanging safely over the terrace floor. "Who is we?"

The creature smiled Chris's smile, but without the lips that I so longed to feel again.

"There are many of us, however we operate as one. We do not see the need for division, since efficiency is our tool of choice. We tend to

appear in a pleasing form, your father to your mother, your Cristopher to you, Dr. Meagan to your Christopher. Our only tell is that when we leave our world and enter yours, our intentions are laid bare."

I was on the verge of understanding. "What do you mean your intentions are laid bare? Is it the smell?"

The creature continued,

"Yes, it is the smell. What you smell is not rotting flesh, though it may appear as such when tested by your human science. We have no need for flesh, but the stench of rotting possibilities. The smell of overwhelming poverty that your parents should have been subjected to, the acrid odour of a life wasted consuming drugs, and the overpowering fragrance of every failure you had ever encounter and undertaken. Christopher Smells your death, you smell your wasted life, your mother smells poverty, the woman at the Hotel (I presumed he was referring to the clerk) smells the stench of an affair she wished she never had, Anthony smells the stench of a hit and run that was never reported."

The small child in the Tim Hortons wasn't repelled by the creature's smell, because she was too young to know the stench of failure, the pungent scent of unfair advantage. She instead focused on his grotesque lip. It was making sense.

"Then why does your lip bleed?" It was the only thing about the creature's physical appearance that remained a mystery.

"Because we pay a price too. Nothing in existence goes unchecked, and until we remove the imbalances that we are charged to rectify, until we collect all debts, until we ensure payment of all dues, we suffer the consequences of inequality as well. We rot and fester until the ledger is made balanced. Until a fine, delicate, even measure is struck."

"Why can't your write like us?" I had to know. *"We do not write. We manipulate the fabric of your world to generate the notes and the messages that we send. It allows us to remind you of the unevenness, of the urge to rectify, without having to visit you. Everyone owes a debt, not only you."*

I couldn't help but lock eyes with him through this entire period. He was explaining himself, and apparently all I needed to do was ask. A physicists worst nightmare is not asking a question when it is required, and I had confronted that fear head on.

"But you or your kind, or whatever the right phrase would be made the deal with my father, you made the deal with Christopher for my life. How can you claim to be some great force that brings equality when you yourselves brought about the unbalance in the first place!" This was the first time that I spoke to the creature with anger.

"Never over estimate your worth. Even if you are tempted by fate. Never take a deal without understanding that you do not deserve an advtange, and not just you. Everyone" The creature rattled this off as if he had been asked it many times before.

"So, how do I even the balance? How do I equate the ledger?" I asked, no longer filled with fear but an all consuming need to bring finality to this situation.

"Everything you have must be ours. Everything you own must be given back." The creature said, in Christopher's calm, soothing voice.

"Do I die?" I asked in an almost childlike fashion.

"Do you wish to even the score?" The creature asked.

"Do you often ask?" I retorted.

"Do you wish to pay your debts, do you wish to even the score?" The creature asked again, almost in an a monotonous tone this time. He could feel the finality of his mission approaching, and the balance in this situation being restored.

"Yes." I had no choice, this was the only answer I could give. If he could empty a city by opening a suitcase, what was left for me?

"Follow me," the creature commanded.

I dismounted the balustrade and walked 5 feet behind the creature. We turned the corner, and there, still shining with the light of a thousand sun's was the suitcase. He pointed at it, and nodded his head.

As I approached the suitcase, I realized that the light was bearable. My eyes no longer hurt, and the light consumed me, instead of simply blinding me. I looked deep inside. It was like looking at a television, a display of sorts. I could see countless other debts, both collected and outstanding.

Joseph P. Kennedy (JFK's father), billions over night, daughter died in tragic plane accident at 27. A woman who resembled Mrs. Thompson-Fitch, endless wealth won in a divorce, even though she was unfaithful, cancer by 65. Terminal. A bumbling fool of a man who looked like a young version of my father watching a stock ticker bring him closer to unimaginable wealth. Anthony, crying in a car after mowing down a 9

year old while on vacation in Italy. And a million others.

“What is this?” I asked, absolutely fascinated and mortified

“It’s what allows us to even the score. You give yourself to us by entering it, and we remove the debt.” He calmly said.

“I have to get into it?” There was no longer strength left to be surprised, or to be distraught. If I had to give my life, give everything that I love and everything that I hold dear in order for this debt to be removed, for the world to reach a balance, and for my Christopher to go about living his life, even without me, it was what needed to happen. I would no longer have peace in my life. I would no longer have my life, if I failed to comply.

I set one foot inside and fell through.

Cigarettes and old paper. That was the only thing that I smelled. My vision was blurry but slowly cleared. I was sitting at my desk, in my office at the University. I looked around and everything seemed... Well everything seemed normal.

I shot out of my chair and backed up against the wall. I felt my face, my arms, my legs, my dick, everything. I touched myself everywhere I could. Was that it? All I needed to do was step foot inside of a suitcase and this debt was evened out? Or maybe I had died and this was what the other side of existence felt like.

I ran out of my office and towards the exit of the building. I bolted outside and could feel the hot July sun beating down on my face. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 11:30am July 31, 2014.

I kept running as fast as I could, losing my breath but still pushing myself. I had to see my family, I had to see my mum, I had to see my Christopher.

I darted to my car, and hit the auto-open button. The *beep beep* that it made when the automatic starter unlocked the locks stopped me. The creature. The last few days. It couldn’t have been a dream. This is insane. What the hell happened to my life.

I entered the car and took a deep breath. No smell, no stench. Maybe all of the years of doing drugs did in fact catch up to me, and this was a delayed delusion. The German-Accented Siri type assistant that accepted voice commands in the car actived.

“Hello Dr. Blochbauer, the weather today is 28 degree, your estimated time of travel is thirty minutes”

“CALL CHRISTOPHER!!!!!!” I screamed at her.

“Calling Mother,” she recited back.

Typical, I thought. At lleast the inaccuracy of that interaction made me believe that this was reality. If I was dreaming, the damn thing would have worked perfectly.

The phone was ringing, and Sylvie’s comforting voice answered.

“Hello Dr. Blochbauer, your mother is reading on the terrace, would you like to speak with her?”

‘Reading’ this early? oh well, who cares, she was there! She was alive! She wa...

My mind stopped. Everything froze. I slammed on the brakes. Luckily no one was behind me or I could have caused a serious accident.

“Sylvie what did you call me?” I asked.

“Dr. Blochbauer...I’m sorry, would you prefer Peter.” She innocently responded.

My wedding ring was gone.

“Sylvie, Where’s Christopher?” I was starting to hyperventilate. I didn’t know what was happening. Why was she calling me by my maiden name, where was my RING!?

“I’m Sorry Dr. Blochbauer, I don’t know who Christopher is.”.....I stared blankly at the windshield, what was going on? What price did I pay.

“Dr. Blochbauer.....Dr. Blochbauer....Peter? Are you there?” Sylvie repeated the question, but I still didn’t answer. I hung up the phone by clicking the button on the steering wheel and floored the accelerator. 204 km per hour appeared on the digital readout as I tore down the

highway to the house that we shared.

I finally slowed down at Yonge street and exited the highway. The light was red at the end of the ramp, and I hit the voice activated assistant button again.

“CALL CHRISTOPHER!” I screamed at her.

“Calling mother” She replied in her sterile, German tone. I hung up the call.

I held down the home button on my iphone and the famous di-dit of Siri sounded, “CALL CHRISTOPHER” I said.

“I don’t see Christopher in your address book, should I look for locations by that name?” Was the only thing she said. The light turned green.

I tore through the streets of Toronto, laws be damned, and turned onto my street. I had to swerve to miss the 12 year old blonde on her bicycle. As my house drew nearer, I could see that the Garage door was opening. CHRISTOPHER MUST BE HOME!!!! This relieved me.

I made a hard right turn into the driveway and froze.

There in the middle of my garage was the suitcase. Tattered, worn, but no smell. I didn’t smell the creature. Nothing.

I ran into the house. It was different. The decor was the same, but the pictures on the wall featured me and my friends doing things that I did not remember at all. Me with Sonya at a fashion show. Myself with Bing running the Boston Maraton, Sumentha and I having lunch in Paris. But that was it, no pictures of Christopher and I. NOTHING.

I started to pant. To gasp. I was losing my mind. NO NO NO NO NO, not again, please not again, I didn’t want to go through this again, I thought it was finished.

I ran into the garage and the suitcase was gone. I ran back into the house, unbelievably hoping to see the creature to ask what was going on. But nothing. I ran up to the bedroom that we had shared, only my clothing was in the closet. Nothing of Christopher’s was there. Christopher wasn’t there. Christopher hadn't been there. Ever.

Where both our degrees hung, only hung my string of degrees, set in the middle instead of at the top of the wall. No room for his.

I ran into the living room, and pulled what should have been our wedding album off the shelf. Instead of the cream coloured leather front, it was red plastic. The Seychelles, The potential adoption, the trips to Venice, the Love, the fucking Love! What did I do!?

I flipped open the album. Again, just pictures of me and my friends, pictures of me and men I didn’t recognize. Pictures of me kissing the occasional man and more pictures of my friends. Nothing of Christopher.

I flipped to the last page, only one word. I Dropped the album and collapsed, weeping on the ground.

KoLLEcted

It isn't Satan. It isn't monsters. It isn't the government. It isn't a serial killer. It isn't aliens. It isn't demons. It isn't nuclear. It isn't solar storms.

by Grindhorse

Winner - Best Original Monster of 2014

Doorbells are not inherently scary. The doorbell rings; the door is answered. Of course, what's on the other side of the door can change the interaction significantly.

I'm a house painter by trade. Generally, I work by myself or with Joe, a middle-aged, silent type. He's a nice guy, a talented painter, and a devout Christian. It's funny to think his faith actually has little to do with what happened that day.

It was a Wednesday afternoon. The entire day was spent hanging drywall, completely covering the ceilings of two bedrooms. If you've ever covered a ceiling in drywall, we can swap stories of shoulder pain and screw shards in our fingers later.

Two women lived in the house, with its cracking walls, dusty everything, and strange ability to cast shadows in a room facing direct sunlight. Somewhat elderly women. Sisters, I think; I wasn't too sure. Kind women, but they had a tendency to walk completely in sync with one another. It was like, if you've ever seen the movie Don't Look Now, it reminded me of the old women in that. Man, that was a pretty good movie; it used suspense effectively, but after a while the lack of anything happening became a bit mundane.

Oh, sorry, I'm rambling. I daydream when I work, so documenting the day brings out the talker in me. But, anyway, the women had left for several hours. No idea where they went, but judging by the empty Lorezapam bottles and compulsive conversations about death on the news, I'd say nowhere important. Just getting away from the loneliness and depression that is the Philadelphia suburbs for a while.

So, it was myself, Joe, and a dying radio set to the oldies. The radio would turn to static whenever I walked by. Only me, which I found odd. I joked in my head about possibly being a demon. These are the things one thinks about while screwgunning a 400th spiral into gypsum. Spiral Into Gypsum would actually be a decent band name, honestly. There I go, rambling again. The stories never stop aboard this train of thought...

The doorbell rang.

Joe called from the other room, “Hey, Dave, mind grabbing that? My hands are full.”

“Should we really be answering the door with the homeowners gone?”

“Well...no, I suppose whoever it is can always come back.” Silence. “Come help me dry fit this.”

I sigh, knowing soon I'll be holding my arms above my head for a lot longer than I'd want.

One hour passes, and the women haven't come home. We've exhausted our drywall surplus upstairs, so Joe charges me to run downstairs to grab another sheet myself. Maneuvering a cumbersome piece of Sheetrock is not something I'm excited about, but the sooner we finish, the sooner I can kill all the ice cream in my freezer. Since I'm basically a child. Fuckin' sue me.

Charging down the stairs, I stop. The front door is covered by a thin curtain, obscuring the window in it somewhat, but the sunlight pouring through outlines a silhouette on the other side of the door. I cock an eyebrow, as if anybody can see my confusion. Whoever happened to be standing there was completely still, so I decided to assume it was one of the women on their porch admiring the bland street corner. It's funny how we instantly rationalize what we don't understand. It isn't so much that we make sense of the world, but we invent our own reality where nothing bad can happen.

My hand gripped the tarnished handle and turned, pulling the door open to reveal a man in a black suit — a suit that would've been more at home 200 years prior. He was wearing a bowler hat and looked vaguely similar to an elderly Sinatra. His voice, however, was not from The Chairman: deep and leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Hello friend, I started to think you would never answer the door.”

It was at this point I should've closed the door in his face, but frankly I don't think it would've changed the events that followed.

“I...didn't know you were there this whole time. You a friend of Maureen's?” He had to know the homeowners somehow, right? Right. Breathe and remember: rationalize.

“No, I'm just here to deliver an envelope to a...Joe Hause? Is that what that says?” The man pulled some reading glasses from his pocket. “Yes, Joe Hause. Do you happen to be Joe?”

“No, I'm not Joe, but I could take this to him if you'd like. He's right upstairs...”

“I can't allow you to touch this envelope, but if you would allow me to come in, I'd be more than happy to deliver the envelope and be on my way.”

I heard steps behind me. I was wondering when Joe would get impatient.

“Dave, where's the drywa- who's that?”

“I'm not important, but this envelope is for Joe Hause. Would you be Joe Hause?” The old man was exceedingly pleasant, cracking a smile without a hint of malice.

“I am...” Joe approached the man as one would approach a leper. He snatched the off-white envelope, opening it at arms length. “If this is anthrax, I'm making sure you die with me, old man.” Joe was also a conspiracy theorist.

The man just grinned. “It's nothing of the sort, but I appreciate the humor.”

Joe removed a single piece of paper from the envelope, reading it aloud, brutally grimacing.

“It isn't solar storms. It isn't demons. It isn't nuclear.” Pause. “Then what the fuck is it?”

“I just deliver the messages.” The old man gave a stiff wave before collapsing into a pathetic heap.

The police arrived promptly, pulling up in a storm of light and sound. They took statements from each of us, surveyed the area; the homeowners came back, obviously horrified an old man died on their porch. This was made more bizarre by the women asserting that they had never before seen the unfortunate visitor.

The old man was a complete stranger to everyone, apparently. He had nothing in his pockets. No tags on his clothing. No fingerprints. His teeth were dentures with no label or serial number branded onto them. The cops fidgeted for a while, taking pictures, shooting their guns at each other in a weird take on a water gun fight, punching stray animals. We all joined in, and it was a great time. I'm kidding, but the officers really didn't know what to do, so naturally they told us to call them if anything else happened. They were gone.

Maureen's supposed sister had gone upstairs to lie down. Joe, myself, and Maureen made awkward small talk, having no stake in this old man and wanting to banish the ordeal from memory. Joe made no mention of the envelope to the police or to the sisters.

Eventually, we all decided the best course of action was for Joe and I to go ahead and continue working. I wish we left.

I was working in the front bedroom, so I pushed the door open, not remembering having closed it, but telling myself I'm forgetful sometimes. There was Maureen's sister Diana, lying dead on the floor, eyes wide, chest and stomach sliced open revealing a bloodless cavity. Her arm was propped up with a wooden board, forcing it to point directly at the ceiling. One of the pieces of drywall had a new arrangement of nails. The black heads all gathered in a pentagram; it appeared to be bleeding, red fluid dripping from the old nail holes.

I guess I should mention the rest of the room. Diana wasn't the only dead body. One of the police officers and two people I had never seen before all lay dead and empty, pointing up to the ceiling. The furniture, which only consisted of a bed and a desk, were covered in sheets. Joe's tools, two different-sized pliers, a drywall saw, a drill, and a painter's putty knife sat neatly on top of the desk. The bed was covered in envelopes.

It may have been a gut reaction to the scene, but Joe ran frantically to the envelopes, tearing each one open like a spoiled kid on Christmas: “it isn't Satan. It isn't monsters. It isn't demons. It isn't a serial killer. It isn't aliens.” The envelopes all contained variations of the trope, gradually turning Joe's tone from urgent to pleading.

He collapsed into tears. My heart was racing, but until you've seen something atrocious, you don't know how you would react. Maureen vomited before passing out on the floor. I stood still, sweating, wringing my hands. The vice grip in my chest signaled a panic attack. What do I do now? What did this?

Then Joe opened the last envelope. This one was completely black, buried beneath the others. Unlike the previous letters, this was opened with care. The vigor was gone.

Joe stood still for a while before turning to look out the window. Where I was situated at the door, I couldn't see what he was looking at, but I didn't need to see it.

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE NOW.” Joe turned to me in a frenzy, running towards the door as I heard shattering glass. I glanced back as I flew down the stairs only to see Joe clawing at the hardwood floor, nails tearing off into cascading blood. He was being dragged by a scabbed hand with long, yellowing nails. I didn't see what the hand belonged to, but it didn't matter. I thought of going back to save Maureen, but as I plowed through the front door, her body exploded from the window above me. The sound of bones cracking and ripping accompanied the unnatural bounce of the corpse.

“Run little rabbit. It's hunting season.” Monotonous tone. Sour taste in my mouth. The taste of garbage and hate. Not my own hate.

I threw open my car door, remembering suddenly that my battery had been temperamental lately.

One turn of the key. Grinding sounds.

Two turns of the key. Grinding sounds.

Three turns of the key. No sounds.

I looked up at the second floor window, feeling eyes on me. Being parked across the street, the view of the window was clear enough to make out an abnormally large head, given that appearance by a mass of matted, straw-like black hair. The hair obscured all facial features except the scarred, dirty cheeks and jaw, adorned with -- well, it wasn't a smile -- the mouth was open displaying gritted, caramel teeth; the expression didn't indicate any emotions.

Four turns. The windowgazer slithered from the window, limbs being used in the wrong way to exit onto the overhang above the front door.

Five turns. The windowgazer reached a scabbed hand onto the drainpipe, attempting to slide down the pipe upside-down. The nails and brackets on the tube tore flesh from the thing, dripping blood onto the pavement in a sinister shower.

Six turns. The thing lay still on the ground for several seconds before wildly flailing its bony body parts, the whole time seemingly training that eyeless gaze on me. Mouth still open. Teeth still gritted. Blood still leaking from fresh wounds.

Seven turns. Lucky seven, the car came to life, turning the corner, and I was gone...right into traffic.

“Fuck...fuck, fuck, fuck.” Cars in front, cars behind. I glanced behind me, expecting to see the beast wandering towards the main road. Instead I saw Maureen and Diana pull their car around the block.

My phone buzzed. It was Joe. “He...hello?”

“Where the fuck are you, man?”

“I...you...you're okay?”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You ran to your car all panicky. I'm concerned for YOU...”

I pulled the car to the side of the road, staring at my hands for no reason other than that they existed. The phone was still on; Joe asked if I was there, but I couldn't bring myself to answer. Was it really Joe? I decided to ask him one thing.

“What did it say in the last envelope?”

Static for a second, then a sour taste in my mouth. I knew I wasn't going back to that house.

“It's curiosity.”